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CONTENTS

June 2016, Vol. 81 No. 6

PAIN RELIEF NOW!

Americans spend billions to ease their pain, but false promises and dangers from cures gone wrong can wreak their own havoc. Read our expert guide to what works, what doesn't, and what's risky.

P. 28

Renovation Without Aggravation

Make your home remodel a low-stress success with our planning primer, complete with strategies to spot contractors' shady practices.

P. 40

Get More Wedding for Your Money

Discover ways to save money, skirt scams, and plan wisely–and still have a wedding in high style.

P. 48

COVER: HAIR & MAKEUP: PAUL INNIS

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COVER ILLUSTRATION: BRYAN CHRISTIE DESIGN

CONTENTS

June 2016, Vol. 81 No. 6

IN EVERY ISSUE

5 From the President: Easing Your Pain
We tackle this tough topic as a national dialogue about pain gains prominence.

6 Your Feedback
Readers' comments about our content, in email and social media.

7 Consumer Reports Everywhere You Are

8 Building a Better World, Together
We continue to speak out–about auto safety and food safety–and government and industry are listening.

27 Recalls

66 Index A year's worth of products.

67 Selling It Goofs and gaffes.

P. 20

INSIGHTS

9 Bright Idea?
We test a lightbulb designed to outsmart burglars looking for unattended houses.

10 A Whole New View
Amp up your smartphone photos with nicely priced clip-on lenses.

13 5 Things You Need to Know Before You Buy ... a Toilet
Glow-in-the-dark seats, "throne" height, and built-in bidets are just some reasons you might want to upgrade.

14 Ask Our Experts
Trip insurance in a time of Zika, how to keep allergies at bay indoors, and when to paint.

P. 14

PRODUCT UPDATES

15 Stream On!
Watching TV isn't what it used to be–it's better. We steer you to the best streaming services, players, and pricing plans. RATINGS

20 Make Mine Meatless
The tastiest, most nutritious veggie burgers for your summer cookouts. RATINGS

23 Cold Brew for Hot Days
Cold brewing delivers chilled coffee, minus the bitter. We test some new makers.

26 Dishwashers That *Don't* Make a Splash
Machines that get dishes clean–and dry. RATINGS

27 Taking A Bite Out of Apple
Why Samsung smartphones now reign high in our Ratings.

27 Before & After
Three products get makeovers after our tests.

ROAD REPORT

57 In Pursuit of Used Car Happiness
A smart secondhand purchase can deliver more value than a more expensive new car can. RATINGS

60 Why Haggling Really Pays
It works almost every time, so learn the secret to doing it right.

62 More Than a Pretty Face
The Kia Optima should tempt many Accord and Camry buyers away from their familiar favorites. RATINGS

63 A Work Truck, Plain and Simple
The popular, bare-bones Toyota Tacoma wins for reliability, if not much else. RATINGS

64 Long-Distance Cruiser
The redesigned Toyota Avalon gets better gas mileage than you might expect for a large sedan. RATINGS

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PHOTO: MELANIE DUNEA

Easing Your Pain

Marta L. Tellado, President and CEO
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THIS MONTH Consumer Reports is taking on an issue that has been very much in the public eye—an issue that affects every single one of us: pain. Whether you're a doctor prescribing medication or a patient in need of treatment, the choices you make can be the difference between prolonged suffering and lasting relief.

Whether it's a bad back, an arthritic knee, or a recurring headache, pain can be so much more than just an inconvenience—it can lead to long-term hardship, incorrect diagnoses, and even an increased risk of prescription drug overuse. And as a national dialogue about pain picks up speed, questions remain for consumers: What are the risks of my medication? How do I decide which treatments are most likely to work? Are these pills just masking my symptoms, or are they getting to the root of the problem?

Understanding the nature of pain is the first step to feeling better, which is why this month's issue takes a hard look at the many facets of pain management that consumers and medical professionals grapple with today. Of course, Consumer Reports has a long history of debunking myths and providing valuable insights in this area—not to mention offering services such as our Consumer Reports Best Buy Drugs initiative, which since 2004 has equipped consumers with free information about the effectiveness, safety, and cost of medications. That unbiased analysis, and the information in these pages, is made possible through your support.

Consumer Reports has a long history of providing insights about pain management.

So the next time pain strikes and you aren't sure what to reach for, you can start by reaching for Consumer Reports to find expert guidance on safe treatments, strategies to ease your suffering, and advice on getting to the root of pain to ensure your well-being.

ABOUT THE COVER

To achieve the 3D effect of our cover—which shows not only the beauty of a human back but also the engineering of our nervous system, musculature, and skeleton—we paired up a couple of award-winning photo artists. Steve Vaccariello started his career photographing surgeries and operating room traumas, which gave him insight into the human form; today he often photographs dancers. Bryan Christie, who specializes in scientific and medical photo illustration, overlaid anatomically correct imagery on the model's back in a virtual space. Christie believes that "art and science are branches of the same tree."

YOUR FEEDBACK

READERS' COMMENTS ABOUT OUR CONTENT, IN EMAIL AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Steering Clear of a Crash

With this year's April Auto Issue, we made headlines with the debut of our new Overall Score and our new virtual-reality video of our renowned Auto Test Center (at ConsumerReports.org/cars, seen by almost 40,000 viewers at press time). We heard from readers who rely on our advice before they buy a car, and from a number of people who think the best safety equipment in any vehicle is a properly trained and attentive driver. On social media, hundreds of users shared which cars they love or would never buy again, and thanked us for their favorite issue of the year.

I AM COMMENTING on "10 Ways to Avoid a Crash." I will be 16 years old in one month. I can see that while it [technology] may prevent some crashes, I think that it would only encourage texting while driving. You use the example of a person falling asleep while driving. Should automatic emergency braking and lane-keeping assist really replace paying attention? In my opinion, the cheapest and most obvious option is to make more cars with manual transmission. I drive a manual, and once you get the hang of it, it is really no harder than an automatic. Also, when you add on these electronic devices, it increases the price of the car, which in turn makes it hard for poor people to buy them. Mandating this for all cars does not make sense.
–Logan Meyer, Little Rock, AR

"10 WAYS TO AVOID A CRASH" has great ideas but one you left off the list. Why don't ALL cars have auto-on headlights whenever the car is running? I live in Michigan and I see cars early in the morning or at dusk, or in heavy rain or snow, suddenly appear out of the dark. Cars with lights on can be seen. A $20 part would save lives.
–Patrick Garrett, Battle Creek, MI

The faster these [safety features] become standard, the better. Shopping for a used car and trying to get these options is really tough; none of the used-car shopping websites list these features. Add to that the fact that each automaker calls them different things. Imagine if antilock brakes were called "Ford Super Brakes" or "Toyota Stopping Extreme Tech," depending on the brand. It's a pain!
–David Mellor, via Facebook

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EDITOR'S NOTE *For our best advice on buying a used car, see "In Pursuit of Used Car Happiness," on page 57. As for safety features, our take is that they help people who may ordinarily be good drivers but may be distracted (for whatever reason) or could be surprised by an emergent situation ahead. We have called on automakers to make these features standard. Cost efficiencies should drive down the unit cost, making them affordable to all drivers.*

You want safer cars? End in-car cellphone usage forever with federally mandated cell-phone jammers wired into the ignition. Cell phones won't work while the engine is running. You can run your motor OR you can run your mouth, but you can't run 'em at the same time.
–Joe Wylie, via Facebook

I HAVE BEEN looking at the Subaru Impreza because of its 37 mpg rating. But you rated the car at 26 mpg. Why is your number different from the manufacturer's?
–Dan Long, Elgin, IL

EDITOR'S NOTE *Subaru probably cites the Environmental Protection Agency's 37 mph rating for the 2015 Impreza, but that's a highway-only mileage. In our tests, the Impreza got 33 highway mph and a combined city and highway mph of 26. We test in real-world situations and the EPA uses lab tests, so we think our numbers more closely match what a driver can expect.*

YOUR 2016 AUTOS ISSUE is the best ever. I was particularly impressed with your innovation of awarding bonus points for having forward-collision warning and automatic emergency braking as standard equipment. This is a clever and hopefully effective way of encouraging manufacturers to adopt the new safety features. But why not also reward manufacturers that reduce the driver distractions themselves? There are many ways to reduce the misuse of cell phones and the distractions created by navigation aids. Why not use your influence to address this?
–Manuel Ares, Jamesville, NY

Have never bought a car without your advice, and it has never let me down.
–Debbie Clark Trolsen, via Facebook

Anyone getting a new/used car needs April issue of @ConsumerReports–they drill down so far, you can almost see the other side of the planet.
–@bookofjoe, via Twitter

Home Improvements

I PLAN TO PUT my house on the market, and in reading "8 Ways to Boost Your Home's Value" (March 2016), I realize that my home meets all the criteria [for good resale value]. I live in a walkable community, my home is easy to maintain, and it's "move-in ready." Knowing that there are an increasing number of singles buying a home is important. Also, it's good to know that my home can easily support multigenerational families. This issue of Consumer Reports will allow me to be proactive in describing my home and choosing an appropriate listing price.
–D.O., via email

WE HAVE A HOME that is 27 years old and are looking to update it. My wife and I don't completely agree on where we should spend our limited funds, so this issue was very helpful in making the case on where those limited dollars should go to add to the value of our home.
–Michael C., via email

Safer Outdoor Power Washing

"UNDER PRESSURE" (March 2016) about pressure washers identifies the direct injury hazards, but it misses other points. First, pressure washing a home's exterior will throw paint chips all over the yard or even into adjacent properties. In older homes, these chips often contain lead, which poses a serious health hazard, especially for children. Another issue is that you must seal openings; a pressure washer used carelessly can force water under thresholds or through window sashes, causing extensive damage to the interior. Finally, water under high pressure can seriously damage siding and exterior woodwork if not handled carefully.
–Paul Rude, Berkeley, CA

EDITOR'S NOTE *Thank you for those good points. But the takeaway from our report is still that damage is much more likely to come from a zero-degree nozzle than a wider nozzle. The EPA doesn't require that paint be tested before a renovation but does offer safe practices for paid workers and guidelines for do-it-yourselfers, at epa.gov/sites/production/files/201311/documents/steps_0.pdf.*

CLARIFICATION In "Ask Our Experts" (May 2016), we recommended the Clear$_2$O carafe water filter and said it was NSF-certified. It was at the time of our lab tests, but the company didn't renew the voluntary certification after it expired. The Clear$_2$O is still our top pick, but we also recommend the ZeroWater 10-cup pitcher, which is NSF-certified.

WRITE Go to ConsumerReports.org/lettertoeditor to share your comments for publication. To reach us on social media, see the facing page.

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Get the most cash back with the help of our new credit card comparison tool. It's designed to help you find the card that will best reward you based on how you spend. Enter your estimated spending on items like groceries and gas, and the tool will reveal how much cash you'll get back over one year and three years. It can add up to hundreds or even thousands of dollars.

Ride along with our auto-track director, Jake Fisher, and experience a virtual-reality test drive at ConsumerReports.org/cars using your computer, smartphone, tablet, or VR viewer.

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MAKING OUR ROADS SAFER

IN FEBRUARY WE CALLED on automakers to offer the latest crash-prevention technology as standard equipment on all cars. We felt so strongly that we also decided to award bonus points—and thus give a higher score in our Ratings—to vehicles that include forward-collision warning or automatic emergency braking (AEB) as part of the base sticker price. And manufacturers are starting to hear that message.

In March the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety announced a commitment by 20 automakers—representing more than 99 percent of the U.S. market—to make AEB a standard feature on the majority of new cars by 2022. Excluded right now are heavy-duty trucks (which will be folded into the program later) and some high-performance sports cars.

"By proactively making emergency braking systems standard equipment, these 20 automakers will help prevent thousands of crashes and save lives," said Transportation Secretary Anthony Foxx.

Consumer Reports has agreed to help monitor progress toward the 2022 target.

"We look forward to working with NHTSA and IIHS to help put this plan into action and hold automakers accountable," says Jake Fisher, our director of auto testing.

Within days of the announcement, Toyota said that AEB would be standard on the vast majority of its vehicles by 2017, ahead of the target year. We urge other automakers to swiftly roll out these systems earlier than 2022, and we support NHTSA's intention to set mandatory rules if they don't.

Go to **ConsumerReports.org/car-safety/cars-with-advanced-safety-systems** to see which cars already have the technology. You can search by make and model, and see whether AEB is standard or optional equipment.

TAKING DRUGS OFF THE MENU

ABOUT HALF of the antibiotics produced globally are used to promote growth and prevent (rather than treat) disease in food animals. As we've reported in our coverage of this important issue, such overuse can cause antibiotic-resistant bacteria to spread to people through air, soil, water, manure, and contaminated meat.

That's why Consumers International, a federation of advocacy groups (including Consumer Reports), is urging KFC, McDonald's, and Subway to make a commitment to stop serving meat from animals raised on antibiotics used in human medicine.

With a total of 100,000 locations around the world, those chains can help clean up the world's food supply faster than governments alone. Go to consumersinternational.org to follow the campaign.

A SAFER CHICKEN IN EVERY POT

CHICKEN BREASTS are America's most popular main dish, but they're also a leading cause of food poisoning. In 2014 Consumer Reports revealed that 97 percent of chicken breasts we tested harbored bacteria that can make you sick. At that time, the Department of Agriculture had standards to guard against bacteria in whole chickens but not for chicken parts.

Now, for the first time, the government has set limits for breasts, legs, and wings: No more than about 15 percent of samples from any producer can be contaminated with salmonella, and no more than about 8 percent can test positive for campylobacter. The USDA also set percentages for ground chicken and turkey.

According to the agency, the adoption of these rules will prevent 50,000 of the almost 2 million cases of foodborne salmonella and campylobacter that occur each year.

Our food-safety experts helped lay the groundwork for the new limits. "The USDA incorporated several of our specific concerns, including increasing the required sampling frequency and publishing the results from companies submitting test data," says Michael Hansen, Ph.D., senior scientist at Consumers Union.

But there's more work to do. "We'd like to see the salmonella standard drop," Hansen says. "Also, the USDA now needs to set salmonella and campylobacter limits for necks, giblets, and other raw chicken parts."

To stay updated, go to **ConsumersUnion.org/topic/food**, where you can read about our ongoing food-safety efforts.

ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN RITTER

INSIGHTS

BRIGHT IDEA?

WE TEST A NEW LIGHTBULB DESIGNED TO MAKE YOUR HOME LOOK LIVED-IN WHILE YOU'RE AWAY

JULY AND AUGUST are the busiest months for home break-ins, according to the FBI, because of the high number of people away on summer vacations. The police have long suggested putting lights on timers as a deterrent so that your house looks occupied even when it's not.

Some new LED lightbulbs use built-in sensors to react to natural light and motion to make your house look lived-in when you're away. The BeON Home Protection System takes a different approach. The kit consists of three LED lightbulbs (like the one shown here); each contains a microphone, a battery, and Bluetooth technology, all for $200. You put the bulbs in three light fixtures, then program them via an app. (It works with smartphones and tablets that use Bluetooth 4.0.)

You can't set the lights to come on at a particular time, as you can with an old-fashioned timer. But the bulbs' software remembers what time you usually turn the lights on and off and does the same when you aren't home. The system also has settings that turn on the lights in a timed sequence when the doorbell rings, or when a smoke or carbon monoxide alarm sounds.

In our tests, the system worked as promised, though we question whether it will thwart break-ins. Most burglaries occur between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m., so lights turning on and off during the day may signal that nobody is home. And if no one ever answers when the doorbell rings, a burglar on a stakeout might catch on.

As for the bulbs, our experts found them to be as bright as 60-watt incandescents, and liked that they work during a power outage, operating on battery power. (Use the dimmest setting and the bulbs will last 10 hours instead of 20 minutes on the brightest setting.)

BeON says that software updates are coming, so we will keep our eyes on this new product.

–Kimberly Janeway

PROP STYLING: LIZ ENGLEHARDT

PHOTOGRAPH BY JAMES WORRELL

A Whole New View

Take more artful photos with add-on lenses that make your smartphone act more like a traditional camera

by Terry Sullivan

SNAP HAPPY
These small wonders from Mobi-Lens (top), Lensbaby (center), and Olloclip all deliver eye-catching pictures.

PHOTOGRAPH BY THE VOORHES

SUMMER MEANS celebrations–weddings, graduations, pool parties–so you'll probably be calling up your smartphone's camera quite a bit, especially if you're active on social media. And let's be honest: That's practically a competitive sport these days. (What good is a picture if it doesn't go viral, right?)

If you're ready to raise your game, perhaps you should think about adding some lenses to your arsenal–the kind that clip onto a smartphone or tablet, or attach magnetically. They're inexpensive and easy to use, and they fit in the palm of your hand, granting you a kaleidoscope of options previously reserved for people who owned pricey cameras and a bagful of lenses the size of your forearm. Think wide-angle, fish-eye, telephoto, and macro, and specialty models, like a soft-focus lens. Most can be purchased individually or in kits that let you experiment with multiple types of lenses, depending on what the moment calls for.

We ordered several kits and individual lenses, and I experimented with the five shown below and on the next page, using them to shoot stills and video in a variety of settings and with several smartphones. We also asked a photographer to take the lenses to Grand Central Terminal in New York City, where she snapped the shots on these pages with her iPhone 6. The lenses were indeed simple to use, but there are a few things to know before you give them a try:

Most cover up the phone's flash, so you can't really use them in poorly lit places.

Most require you to remove the phone's case before attaching the lens to the phone.

They don't work with every phone. In general, you'll find more lenses made for iPhones than for Android models. So before you buy a lens, check the manufacturer's website to confirm its compatibility with your phone. For a good, versatile choice, take a look at Photojojo's lenses, which attach magnetically to the front of any mobile device.

And it's wise to try before you buy, if possible, to make sure you're happy with the way the lens operates. Or at least make sure you can return it if you're not satisfied.

SMALL LENSES THAT GET BIG RESULTS

Five lenses, five shots, all from Grand Central Terminal in New York City

WIDE-ANGLE

MOBI-LENS WIDE LENS, $30
(Mobi's wide-angle lens)

WHAT IT DOES
Expands the field of view so that you can capture the sweep of a dramatic landscape or fit more people into a group photo.

Novice photographers often overlook those benefits, but the truth is a wide-angle lens can be just as useful as the more widely used telephoto. This Mobi-Lens model sells for $30, or you can opt to buy it in a package with a fish-eye lens for $50.

Mobi-Lens says its lenses are designed to fit any phone. This wide-angle one is easy to attach but also pretty easy to knock askew. One of its biggest selling points: You don't have to remove the phone's case to use the lens like you do with many others.

FISH-EYE

PHOTOJOJO SUPER FISHEYE LENS, $20

WHAT IT DOES
Creates an extremely wide-angle image with noticeable distortion at the edges of the frame.

Not everyone wants their family portraits to look like the cover of Jimi Hendrix's "Are You Experienced?" album. But some people love the surreal look that a fish-eye lens brings to wide shots of horizontal silhouettes such as architecture and landscapes. The closer you are to the subject, the more warped the resulting photo will turn out.

For a traditional camera, a fish-eye lens can be cost-prohibitive, but this $20 model lets you indulge your inner Salvador Dalí without having to become a starving artist in the process. So fire away!
(continued on page 12)

LENS PHOTOS: JOHN WALSH; LOCATION PHOTOS: EMILIE HARJES

TELEPHOTO

OLLOCLIP ACTIVE LENS KIT, $100
(Shot taken with Olloclip's 2x telephoto lens)

WHAT IT DOES
Magnifies the subject without lowering the image quality. This is different from the zoom function on most smartphones, which uses digital tricks to zero in on a subject, often producing a grainy effect.

With a telephoto lens you can't zoom in or out, instead you choose a lens that enlarges the subject by a specific amount. For example, a 2x telephoto lens (like the one used here) draws you twice as close to the action. For portraits or candids, that's often all you need. And the close-up images are clear and crisp, thanks to what's called optical zoom.

This telephoto lens from Olloclip is sold as part of several kits; the one we chose also includes a wide-angle lens.

MACRO

OLLOCLIP MACRO LENS KIT, $70
(Photo shot with Olloclip's 21x macro lens)

WHAT IT DOES
Allows you to capture small details at ultra-close range.

The lens on your phone can't focus on anything nearer than, say, 10 inches away. So when you see a dramatic, frame-filling close-up, it has been shot with a macro lens. The blurred background serves to highlight the detail you focused on.

Just take care as you compose the shot. If you're photographing someone's face, for example, you'll have to choose a feature such as the eyes to be the center of attention.

In this instance, the image was magnified 21 times; Olloclip's Macro Lens kit also includes 7x and 14x macro lenses.

SOFT-FOCUS

LENSBABY DELUXE CREATIVE MOBILE LENS KIT, $120
(Photo shot with Lensbaby's LM10 soft-focus lens)

WHAT IT DOES
Produces a blurred effect that creates dramatic distortions, particularly in brightly lit or shadowy areas.

Though most lens manufacturers try to create the sharpest images possible, Lensbaby seems to love distorting them. Its kit comes with two soft-focus lenses and a reflecting lens that creates a kaleidoscope effect. Its LM10 soft-focus lens produces a larger halo of blur than the LM20.

All three lenses easily attach to your phone with a magnetized bracket. Before you start snapping shots, you'll want to download the Lensbaby Mobile app (free for Android and Apple devices), which lets you switch between still and video modes, and gives you access to more features, such as switching the focal point from one image to another.

DYNAMIC DUO

At first glance, the $500 Olympus Air 14-42 (shown below) looks like a full-sized lens locked onto a smartphone. But it's actually a new kind of standalone camera called a "lens barrel," which features many of the benefits of an SLR camera with interchangeable lenses. Those include optical zoom and shallow depth of field, which makes your chosen subject stand out against the background. In addition to serving as the base, your phone provides the LCD screen that helps you compose shots and access virtual controls such as the shutter button and the zoom. Because the camera syncs wirelessly to your phone, you can even separate the two units and snap pictures while holding the lens aloft or squeezing it into a tight space.

To get full use of the camera's functions, you will want to download the Olympus OA.Central app (free for Android and Apple devices), which allows you to adjust many of the manual settings and have access to other modes, including Instagram-like filters, to give your shots different effects. You can also add Olympus lenses such as telephoto and wide angle for even more dramatic effects.

BIG PICTURE
The Olympus Air gives your phone new powers.

Five Things You Need to Know *Before* You Buy a TOILET

1 Get some glow when you go

The Japanese manufacturer Toto leads the "smart toilet" trend with its Washlet, a remote-controlled bidet with a wand that provides a warm flow of cleansing water. That luxury doesn't come cheap: Washlet-equipped models start at $1,188. (Our top-rated standard toilets cost $100 to $350.) **Toto's Neorest 750h** adds a bacteria-zapping ultraviolet light that's activated when the lid is closed. It costs an eye-popping *$10,200.*

The **Kohler Veil,** *$4,275,* part of its Intelligent line, has a built-in bidet and ultraviolet light, plus a lid that closes automatically. Kohler also offers several "touchless toilets" that you flush by holding your hand over a sensor.

Not ready to spend top dollar on a high-tech toilet? The **Night Glow Seat** is a glow-in-the-dark seat that sells for just *$50.*

The one-piece Kohler Veil ($4,275) has a built-in bidet and night-light.

2 Water misers mean well

You may remember the euphemism "dropping the kids off at the pool." That was before a 1995 federal standard limited toilets to 1.6 gallons per flush (gpf), down from the 4 and 5 gallons that made for more pool-like conditions. Many 1.6 gpf and even some 1.28 gpf toilets got the job done in one flush in our tests.

Dual-flush toilets have two modes: partial and full flush. New models use as little as 1 gallon in partial mode (for liquids). The **Glacier Bay Dual Flush N2316** (Home Depot), *$100,* did best in our tests. But other dual-flush models lacked power, so you could end up having to flush twice.

3 The 'porcelain god' becomes a sculptural design element

Bathtubs led the bathroom design revolution, taking on sculptural forms and unexpected materials, including wood and copper. Toilets are now getting their turn. Consider the **Kohler Numi,** *$6,388,* with its clean lines and illuminated panels. Or a one-piece toilet, a more reasonably priced option that combines tank and bowl in a single molded piece. It was chosen by almost half of all designers last year. **Kohler's Santa Rosa K-3810,** *$300,* aced our tests, though it was a bit noisy.

4 Higher seats give new meaning to 'sitting on the throne'

Chair-height or comfort-height commodes sit about 17 to 19 inches high, 2 or 3 inches higher than traditional toilets. More than 80 percent of toilets selected by professional designers in 2015 were chair height, according to the National Kitchen & Bath Association. Most winners in our tests were, too, including our top pick, the **St. Thomas Creations Richmond ECO,** *$350.*

5 Off-the-wall designs

Wall-hung toilets are popular in Europe, where their compact design is suited to smaller bathrooms. The tank sits behind the wall, saving 9 to 12 inches of floor space and making the floor beneath easy to clean. Now they're catching on in the U.S. One caveat: You have to buy a separate carrier system that mounts to the wall and holds the tank, bowl, and flush activator. So expect to spend at least $1,000 on a wall-hung toilet, not including installation. We haven't tested any in our labs yet.
—Daniel DiClerico

ASK OUR EXPERTS

I'd like to plan a trip abroad but worry about Zika and terrorism. Will trip insurance cover me?

MOST TRAVEL INSURANCE plans will cover you if a terrorist attack or Zika outbreak in your destination (or stopover) prompts you to back out. At press time, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention had issued alerts for about 40 hot spots where the Zika virus is present, and the State Department had just added several new terrorism alerts. Major airlines and cruise lines are providing alternative travel options or refunds for canceled trips, so if you have immediate plans, your best bet is to contact your travel provider.

As for travel insurance, if you buy a policy with a cancel for any reason (CFAR) endorsement on "comprehensive" travel, you should be covered if you decide not to travel because of heightened fears, says Jeff Blyskal, one of our money editors. Even so, you'll probably get back only up to 75 percent of the trip's cost. And a policy isn't cheap; it can be as much as an additional 15 percent of the cost of your trip.

If you still want that safety net, we recommend that you buy a policy from an established broker such as Insure My Trip, a website that offers 250 policies along with guidance by phone (800-487-4722). Avoid buying insurance from a cruise line or travel agent, or as an impulse buy before you click to book a trip online, because those policies are usually very limited in what they cover.

LEARN

We have more than 140 in-house experts who research, test, and compare—so you don't have to! Send your questions to: **ConsumerReports.org/askourexperts** ... and watch this space for the answers.

My allergies are awful. Apart from medication, what can I do in my house to ease the misery?

A GOOD VACUUM is a must. We recommend the Kenmore Progressive 21614 bagged canister, $300, with HEPA filtration (which captures dust) and the Miele Dynamic U1 Twist bagged upright, $450, which comes with a microfiltration filter and optional HEPA filter. Both do well at capturing fine dust without releasing it back into the air, and also do a good job with pet hair, says Dave Trezza, who leads our vacuum tests.

An air purifier might help, too. The portable Honeywell HPA 300, $250, did best in our lab tests at removing dust, pollen, and smoke. But skip ionizing air cleaners because they create potentially harmful indoor ozone levels and can worsen asthma.

Bedding covers can minimize allergies caused by dust mites. Our experts say to look on the label for "woven fabric" of a maximum of 6 micrometers or microns, indicators that the material will actually keep allergens from escaping. (We haven't tested those covers.)

You'll also want to avoid products that can make allergies worse. They include scented products, such as air fresheners, candles, and many cleaning products, as well as personal-care items such as hair spray, nail polish, and perfume.

If you're still suffering, consider taking over-the-counter loratadine, the generic version of Claritin, which is one of the top-rated medications according to our Best Buy Drugs analysis. Our experts evaluate drugs for safety, efficacy, and price; go to **CRBestBuyDrugs.org** to learn more.

How warm is too warm to paint my house?

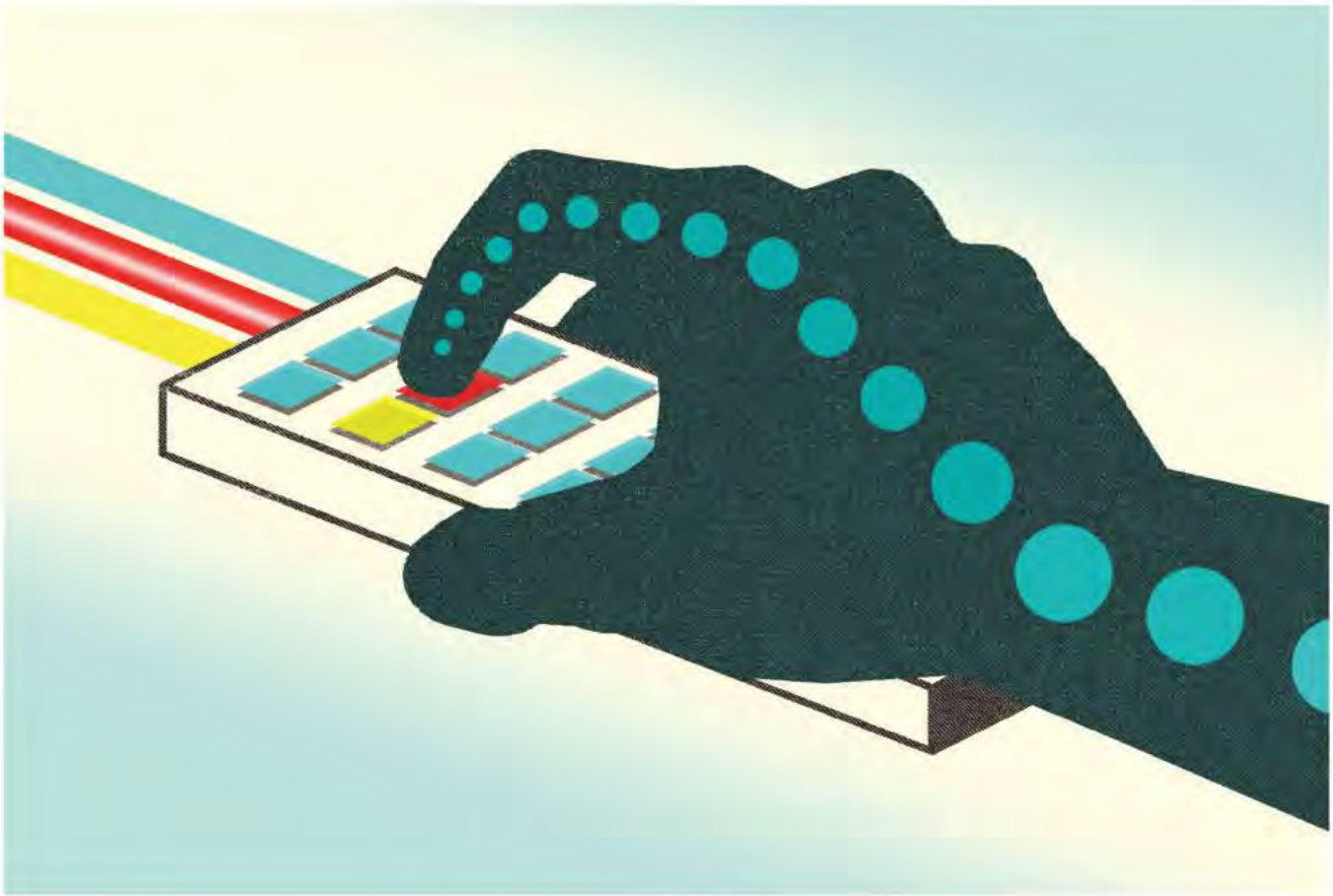
THE USUAL recommended temperature range for latex paints, the type used most often, is 50° F to 90° F, says Rico de Paz, our paint expert. That's mainly for exterior painting; indoor temperatures are usually well within those limits. Just avoid the high end of the spectrum because the temperature of the surface you're painting may be higher than the air around it.

For example, on a summer day the air could be 85° F, but the sun beating down on a house all day could raise the wall temperature above 100° F.

When the surface or the air is too hot, paint dries too quickly, so it may not cover well or allow the brush marks to smooth out. And if it's too cold, the paint may be too thick to spread or even out, or it may not adhere well.

PRODUCT UPDATES

THE LATEST RATINGS FROM OUR LABS



Stream On!

Almost half of us watch shows on Netflix and other streaming media services. We've sorted through the growing number of players and providers to help find the ones just right for you.
by James K. Willcox

"HOUSE OF CARDS," "Transparent," and "Orange Is the New Black" have all won or been nominated for Emmy and Golden Globe awards and generated plenty of buzz over the past couple of years. But you won't find new episodes on network or cable TV: These shows are available only from Netflix or Amazon, two of the many companies streaming movies and other shows over the Internet and into our living rooms.

ILLUSTRATION BY MARK ALLEN MILLER

Based on Consumer Reports' most recent nationally representative survey on streaming, almost half of U.S. adults–47 percent–are watching programs streamed over the Internet. Take a look at what streaming services offer and it's easy to see why they're catching on so quickly. They let you watch movies and shows on your TV, computer, smartphone, or tablet. The only thing you might need to buy is a set-top player (see "Most Valuable Players," on the facing page), and you won't even need that if you have a smart TV, game console, or Blu-ray player that's compatible with streaming services. Those services give you unlimited access to thousands of shows and movies for a low monthly price, and pay-per-view options are available for people who watch a movie or show only occasionally.

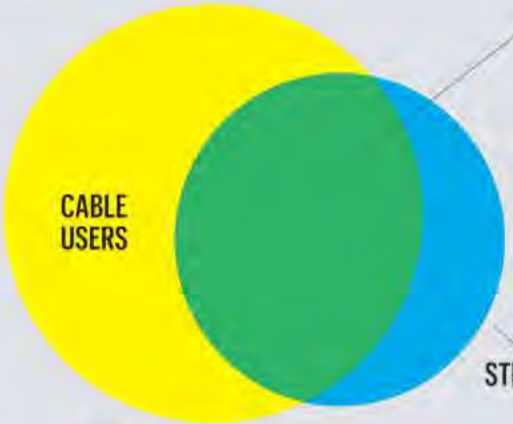
With the growing use of these comparatively inexpensive alternatives to cable, you might expect that Americans would be "cutting the cord" in droves and relying exclusively on streaming. But our recent survey turned up a surprising fact: More than two-thirds of Americans who stream say that they also subscribe to cable TV or a similar pay-TV service. (For reasons people are keeping their cable subscriptions, see "Why We Just Won't Cut the Cable Cord," at right.)

For all of their advantages, streaming services do have a couple of weak spots: Though they provide almost unlimited viewing choices–including classic and foreign movies, recent Hollywood blockbusters, and TV shows from every era–the selection of live sporting events and broadcasts from the major networks is slim.

This guide will help you sort through all of the options, from which streaming player is the right one for your needs (see the facing page) to which streaming services offer the movies and other entertainment you're looking for (see page 18). For streaming veterans, we highlight lesser-known services that cater to specialized tastes, and we recommend ways to cut through the clutter to find the shows you really want to see. All that's left for you to do is pop the corn and pick up the remote.

HOW A STREAM BECAME A FLOOD

A growing number of Americans are watching streaming video, and half of them report getting it from more than one provider. Far from replacing cable, all of that streamed entertainment is being used as a complement to it.



60 percent of cable subscribers have cable TV *and* at least one streaming service.

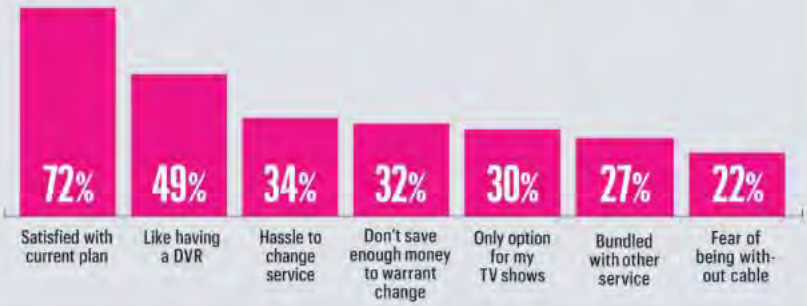
Netflix is a common denominator for most streaming customers.

Sources: Diagram above is from almost 173,000 Consumer Reports subscribers responding to our most recent telecom survey. Chart at left is based on almost 82,000 CR subscribers who said they use streaming services.

*Includes Amazon Prime and Amazon Video.

WHY WE JUST WON'T CUT THE CABLE CORD

Our recent subscriber survey of streamers showed that although about 20 percent of the people who use a subscription or pay-per-view streaming service said they had cut back on or cut off their pay-TV service within the past year, most didn't drop or reduce their service. Here are some of the reasons Americans gave in our national survey for keeping their cable service:



MOST VALUABLE PLAYERS

Almost 90 percent of all streaming media players in the U.S. are sold by Amazon, Apple, Google, and Roku, according to research firm Parks Associates. Here's how to choose the best one for your needs:

AMAZON FIRE TV

$40 to $140

Amazon Fire TV, and the smaller, cheaper Fire TV Stick, are best for Amazon Prime members who already pay $99 per year to get free two-day shipping on orders from the online shopping giant. Both Fire TVs provide access to a lot of streaming services but give priority to Amazon's own content, including Amazon Prime videos, which are included in Amazon's Prime membership fee. Alexa voice assistant is on hand for voice searches, and the pricier player supports 4K Ultra High Definition videos.

APPLE TV

$70 to $200

Apple TV is a no-brainer for those already living in Apple's world. It's the best—and often only—way of getting all of your iTunes content to your TV. Using Apple's AirPlay feature, you can also stream music, videos, and photos stored on your iPhone or iPad to your TV. Apple TV provides access to most of the major streaming services, with one notable exception: Amazon Prime. The newest (4th generation) Apple TV has the Siri voice assistant for searches and entering passwords, and a new touchpad remote control.

GOOGLE CHROMECAST

$35

Looking for a cheap, unobtrusive streamer that keeps getting better with age? Chromecast was the original stick-style streaming player. It's now shaped like a small, colorful disc but still plugs directly into a TV's HDMI input, almost disappearing from sight. There's no remote; instead, you use your smartphone or tablet to select the programs you want to watch. You can also use Chromecast to send—or "cast," in Google's parlance—content from a laptop's Chrome browser to the TV. It's the least expensive model on our recommended list.

ROKU

$40 to $130

Roku, offered in several models, is our top pick for most people, especially those looking for a lot of content. All Roku players are easy to use (but you have to go to the Roku website to set them up) and let you search multiple streaming services; the Roku 3 and 4 allow voice search. A feature called "Roku Feed" lets you track hit theatrical releases and TV shows and alerts you when they become available to stream or when the price drops. At $50, the new Streaming Stick will be the least expensive Roku. The newest, priciest player, the $130 Roku 4, is the first Roku to support 4K UHD videos.

Ratings: Streaming Media Players

A dedicated streaming media player is a simple, relatively inexpensive way to give any TV Internet capability. And even if your TV is already Internet-ready, a streaming player may be more convenient to use or include certain features, such as voice control, that your TV lacks. Once you've decided on the type of player you prefer, above, use our Ratings at right to find the model that best suits your needs.

☑ CR Best Buy ☑ Recommended

● Excellent ◓ Very Good ○ Good ◒ Fair ● Poor

Rec.	Rank	BRAND & MODEL	PRICE	SCORE	TEST RESULTS				FEATURE
					Picture Quality	First-Time Setup	Everyday Use	Connectivity	Built-in Voice Search
☑	1	**Roku** 4	$130	81	●	○	◓	●	•
☑	2	**Roku** 3 (2nd gen.)	$100	76	●	◒	◓	◓	•
☑	3	**Roku** 2 (2nd gen.)	$70	72	●	◒	◓	◓	
☑	4	**Amazon** Fire TV (2nd gen.)	$100	71	●	○	◓	○	•
☑	5	**Amazon** Fire TV Gaming Edition	$140	71	●	○	◓	◓	•
☑	6	**Roku** 1	$50	69	●	◒	◓	○	
☑	7	**Google** Chromecast (2nd gen.)	$35	69	●	◓	◓	◒	
☑	8	**Roku** Streaming Stick (HDMI version)*	$40	68	●	○	○	○	
☑	9	**Nvidia** Shield	$175	68	●	○	○	◓	•
☑	10	**Apple** TV (64GB) (4th gen.)	$200	67	●	○	◓	○	•
☑	11	**Amazon** Fire TV Stick with Voice Remote	$50	66	●	◓	◓	◒	•
☑	12	**Amazon** Fire TV Stick	$40	65	●	◓	○	◒	
☑	13	**Google** Nexus Player	$50	63	●	○	◓	◒	•
☑	14	**Apple** TV (3rd gen.)	$70	61	●	○	○	○	
	15	**Mohu** Channels	$100	60	●	●	○	○	
	16	**Vudu** Spark	$25	36	●	○	○	◒	

*This model is being discontinued. New Roku Streaming Stick costs $50.

Primal Streams: A Guide to Your Viewing Options

SUBSCRIPTION

There's a dizzying array of streaming services to choose from. In general, subscription services such as Hulu and Netflix make the most sense for those who watch a lot of shows and movies, and for fans of original series.

ACORN TV	AMAZON PRIME VIDEO	HBO NOW	HULU	NETFLIX	SHOWTIME (STREAMING)
PRICE					
$5 per month or $50 per year.	$99 per year ($8.25 per month).	$15 per month.	$8 per month with ads, $12 without ads.	$8 per month for standard-def video on a single screen. $10 for high-def video on up to two screens. $12 for 4K UHD video, plus up to four screens.	$11 per month, or $9 per month when purchased through certain services, such as Amazon Prime and Hulu.
WHO IT'S BEST FOR					
Lovers of British TV fare, new and classic. Goodies include TV mysteries (such as **"Prime Suspect,"** with Helen Mirren) and comedies **("Jeeves & Wooster,"** with Hugh Laurie and Stephen Fry), plus dramas and documentaries. HD is offered when available.	**Anyone who's already paying for an Amazon Prime membership.** It carries pay-TV titles such as AMC's **"Fear the Walking Dead";** CBS's summer series, **"Under the Dome";** and HBO's back catalog of shows. Showtime and Starz can each be added for $9 per month. One caution: You still can't get Prime on Apple TV.	**HBO fans who don't want to pay for cable.** Sign up to get all of the network's movies, specials, and documentaries, plus **"Game of Thrones"** and **"Vinyl."** If you already get HBO through your cable package, don't pay twice: The HBO Go app lets you watch HBO shows on phones, tablets, and other devices.	**Cable cord-cutters who don't want to miss out on broadcast TV.** Hulu has current shows from ABC, Fox, and NBC; older ones from CBS; plus the **"Seinfeld"** library. Original content includes **"11.22.63,"** a J.J. Abrams-produced mini-series based on Stephen King's time-travel novel, and **"Casual,"** a comedy series from Jason Reitman.	**Everyone.** Netflix is still the king of binge. It has a vast library of movies and TV shows, plus now-classic original shows **("House of Cards," "Orange is the New Black"),** and even movies **("Beasts of No Nation").** A deal with Marvel spawned **"Daredevil"** and **"Jessica Jones,"** and Netflix subscribers will get exclusive access to Disney titles within a year of their debut, starting with 2016 releases.	**Showtime fans.** Like HBO Now, this service lets you watch a cable network without the cable. You get all of Showtime's movies, plus original shows such as **"Billions," "Ray Donovan,"** and **"Penny Dreadful."** (Showtime Anytime is like HBO Go; it's for people who already get the network through a traditional pay-TV provider.)

PAY-PER-VIEW

These services are best for people who watch movies or shows only occasionally and who are most interested in seeing films recently shown in theaters.

AMAZON VIDEO	APPLE ITUNES	CINEMANOW	FANDANGONOW (FORMERLY M-GO)	GOOGLE PLAY
PRICE				
$4 to $7 for HD rentals.	$4 to $6 for HD movie rentals, $3 for purchases of TV episodes.	$4 to $8 for HD movie rentals, $3 and up for TV rentals.	$4 to $7 for HD movie rentals.	$4 to $7 for HD movie rentals, $2 for purchases of TV episodes.
WHO IT'S BEST FOR				
Impatient viewers. This is a good place to rent or buy recent movies and TV shows that aren't included with a Prime subscription. Also available: popular TV shows a day after they're broadcast, plus lots of older titles.	**Apple fans.** New movies and shows are available, along with older titles and shows from AMC, Comedy Central, TBS, and TNT. You can also access the new Starz standalone streaming service for $9 per month. And iTunes makes it easy to organize your content. A Family Sharing feature lets up to six people access each other's iTunes purchases.	**Movie lovers and, well, pretty much everyone else.** The library offers a vast selection of movies, including independent and documentary films, as well as content from broadcast channels, cable channels (AMC, the CW, Fox, FX, SyFy, and TBS), and premium services such as HBO, Showtime, and Starz.	**M-Go users.** That pay-per-view provider was bought and renamed FandangoNow by Fandango, the movie-ticket company. The service has a prominent place on Roku streaming players and Roku TVs; it will let you rent or buy digital versions of recent movie releases and buy TV shows. We're waiting to see what perks the deal will bring. One idea: Will you be able to buy enhanced movie tickets that include a digital rental or a download?	**Android users.** Google Play offers a solid mix of new and older movies, plus current TV shows the day after they air. You can also rent full TV seasons, usually priced at $15 to $30. You can also access the new Starz standalone streaming service for $9 per month.

SLING TV

Starts at $20 per month.

Cord-cutters. With Dish's Sling TV you don't get individual shows. You get channels. The basic package comes with about 20 cable offerings—including A&E, AMC, Cartoon Network, Disney Channel, Food Network, HGTV, and TBS—but not broadcast TV. It's also one of only a few ways you can get ESPN without a TV service. Themed add-on packs cost $5 per month; HBO can also be added for $15 per month.

VUDU

$4 to $6 for HD/HDX movie rentals, $10 for 4K UHD rentals.

Early adopters. Vudu has been among the first services to embrace various technologies; one of the more recent is 4K video (aka Ultra HD). Vudu is owned by Walmart: When you buy certain DVDs or Blu-rays from the store, you also receive a digital copy instantly. The service also has a program that allows you to convert certain video discs to digital versions and store them in the cloud. But the best thing about Vudu is its big library of content, including recent releases.

SCRATCHING A NICHE

These streaming video services cater to viewers looking for specialized and genre entertainment options.

CRACKLE

PRICE Free.

WHO IT'S BEST FOR

Fans of classic TV and Jerry Seinfeld. The ad-supported service that gave the world the hit series **"Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee,"** in which Seinfeld jokes around with fellow comedians, has beefed up its library. It offers diverse programming that includes TV shows, older movies, and original series.

CRUNCHYROLL

PRICE Free with ads, premium memberships $7 per month.

WHO IT'S BEST FOR

Tweens, teens, and adults who spend hours watching manga-based shows, anime, and other Asian TV fare. The free, ad-supported version features standard-definition streams. The $7-per-month plan gets you HD videos and ad-free access to popular Japanese shows, often within minutes of their original broadcasts.

FANDOR

PRICE $10 per month or $90 for a one-year subscription.

WHO IT'S BEST FOR

Serious cinephiles who prefer the sort of obscure film titles you'd never find on Netflix, including certain Criterion Collection gems. Its social element allows you to create lists to share and compare with friends.

MUBI

PRICE $5 per month.

WHO IT'S BEST FOR

Mubi has morphed from a service that offered a hodgepodge of independent films into one of the best-curated streaming sites for cult and classic films. The site always has 30 titles to choose from, each picked by Mubi's film experts. (One movie is dropped and another is added every day.) It has a social element, like Fandor, but usually has better-known movies.

TUBI TV

PRICE Free.

WHO IT'S BEST FOR

People who don't mind watching ads before—and during—movies and television shows. Tubi TV's library includes films from Lionsgate, MGM, and Paramount Pictures; the company recently inked a deal with Starz Digital for some of that network's independent films and television shows.

FIND YOUR FAVORITES FAST

Sifting through a streaming media provider's offerings to find what you want is tedious. These free websites and apps do the hunting for you.

GOWATCHIT

GoWatchIt initially covered just movies, but TV shows are now part of the mix. Add titles to your queue to find out when movies you want to see become available. GoWatchIt is also a social service; you can share your movie queue with friends.

CAN I STREAM IT

Type in the name of any movie or TV show, and Can I Stream It will let you know which service carries it, whether it's available free, and if not, how much you'll have to pay. You can use the website or a free mobile app for Android and iOS devices. Can I Stream It covers most of the top subscription and pay-per-view services and will notify you when a movie you want to see becomes available.

JUSTWATCH

JustWatch searches for TV shows and movies across 18 streaming services, and tells you where you can stream each one at the lowest price. The site's home page shows you popular titles and lets you limit searches to the services you use. Set up your Watchbar and you can filter the results by attributes such as genre or release year. JustWatch is also available as an Android or iOS app.

REELGOOD

Do you rely on your friends' opinions more than reviews? Then check out Reelgood, an iOS app that will soon be available for Android phones, too. It sifts through more than 10 streaming services to find the things you want to watch. Its greatest value, though, is comparing your watch list with those of your friends and sharing recommendations. It can also tell you when a theatrical release is playing in your area.

Make Mine Meatless

The best 'burgers' at your summer barbecue may not have a shred of beef in them

by Andrea Rock

HAVE YOU EVER BEEN at a cookout, munching on your perfectly grilled hamburger, feeling sorry for your meat-eschewing friend who has to settle for a veggie burger? Maybe you're the one who is missing out.

That's because many of today's veggie burgers are legitimately delicious, bearing little resemblance to the rubbery, flavorless discs you may have tasted once and

PHOTOGRAPH BY THE VOORHES

vowed never to try again. At restaurants such as Superiority Burger in New York City, veggie burgers have achieved gourmet status, and fast food chains are getting onboard, too. Wendy's is test-marketing a black bean burger that's getting thumbs-up for great taste, and White Castle last year added a veggie slider to its menu.

Clearly, meatless burgers are having a moment. According to a 2015 survey from market research firm Mintel, 25 percent of Americans say veggie burgers are on the menu more than once per month; many eat them several times weekly.

The veggie burger renaissance is part of a trend toward eating more plant-based foods. Almost three-quarters of meat eaters substitute nonmeat protein in a meal at least once weekly; 22 percent say they're doing so more often than they did in the previous year, according to a 2015 survey published in Meatingplace, a leading meat industry trade publication.

But what about supermarket veggie burgers? Consumer Reports' dietitians and professional food tasters put 17 widely sold veggie patties to the test. They come in two broad types: meatlike, and grain- and/or vegetable-based. The meatlike offerings usually have soy or pea protein as a main ingredient. The grain- and vegetable-based options are made with ingredients such as sunflower seeds, beans, vegetables (such as peppers, carrots, and mushrooms), and grains (such as bulgur, millet, and quinoa), and don't resemble meat at all. We looked at both types, rating them for nutrition and taste, then combining those scores to give them an overall rating. Our nutritional ratings system gives extra points to veggie burgers with mostly "real" ingredients such as vegetables, grains, and seeds rather than artificial flavorings, additives, and chemical ingredients that are used in extensively processed foods.

More than half of the burgers received a Very Good score for taste. The others all rated Good, though some had bitter notes or harsh garlic flavors, or were mushy. (See specifics on the next page.) Our tasters noted that the meatlike burgers were better on a bun with condiments and that the top grain and vegetable burgers were tasty enough to stand on their own. If you don't feel like sliding them into a bun, our food pros suggest serving them on top of a salad, with scrambled eggs, or with a side of vegetables.

Our nutritional analysis revealed some surprises. First, not all veggie burgers are low in calories. The counts ranged from 100 in Lightlife Smart Patties (2½ ounces) to 360 for Sunshine Burgers Quarter Pound. By comparison, a 3-ounce 93 percent lean beef burger has 164 calories. Sodium was another shocker; four of the burgers had more than 400 milligrams. (Lower-sodium options are available.) Though protein doesn't factor into our nutrition rating algorithm (because most Americans get enough), vegans and others who count on plant protein might be surprised to find that some of the burgers contained as little as 4 or 5 grams.

Note that with some of the burgers weighing as little as 2¼ ounces, you may wind up eating two, so keep that in mind when you're checking the burgers' nutritional information.

A Healthy Homemade Option

Our recipe starts with a simple base that you can make into two types of burgers.

1. Make the base.
Heat 1 teaspoon olive oil in nonstick skillet over medium heat. Sauté ¼ cup each finely chopped onion and red pepper and 1 clove minced garlic until soft, 4 to 5 minutes. Place in large bowl and add 1¼ cup cooked quinoa, ½ cup panko bread crumbs, 1 egg, ½ cup grated sharp cheddar or Monterey Jack cheese, and ⅛ teaspoon each salt and black pepper.

2. Choose your style.
Black bean and corn Add ½ cup black beans, ½ cup corn, ¼ cup chopped cilantro, and ½ teaspoon chili powder.
Carrot and parsley Add 1 cup grated carrot, 1 tablespoon tahini, 2 teaspoons fresh lemon juice, ½ teaspoon cumin, ¼ cup chopped parsley.

3. Chill and cook.
With wet hands gently form six patties. Refrigerate uncovered until firm, at least 30 minutes or up to 4 hours. Heat 1 tablespoon olive oil in nonstick skillet over medium heat. Cook until browned on one side, about 5 minutes. Flip and cook about 5 minutes more.

4. Top and serve.
Top black bean burgers with salsa and avocado. Top carrot burgers with tzatziki.

Nutrition per Burger
Black bean: 180 calories, 8 g fat, 210 mg sodium, 3 g fiber, 7 g protein.
Carrot: 170 calories, 9 g fat, 150 mg sodium, 2 g fiber, 6 g protein.

GO AHEAD, GRILL IT!

Veggie burgers tend to be cooked on the stovetop or in the microwave, but that's not convenient—or fun—when you're hosting a barbecue. These patties can be softer and more delicate than those made with meat, so we wanted to see how they'd hold up on the grill. In short, the answer is pretty well, with a little care. Here are some tips from our grilling tests:

- Don't thaw frozen veggie burgers—they can go straight from the freezer to a clean grill.
- Set the grill to medium heat and don't oil the grates. Preheat the grill for 10 minutes.
- If the veggie burger package has grilling instructions, follow them. If no instructions are provided, cook burgers for about 5 minutes per side.
- Flip burgers carefully and just once, halfway through cooking, to keep them from falling apart.

Overall we found that grilling improved the veggie burgers' texture, giving both the meatlike and the grain- and vegetable-based patties a crisper exterior. Grilling also can add deeper browned flavor notes.

ILLUSTRATION BY THOMAS POROSTOCKY

THE BEST VEGGIE BURGERS

We tested these patties for taste and nutrition. See which ones scored best overall.

Meatlike

VERY GOOD

MorningStar Farms Garden Veggie Patties 1

$1.20 per 2⅓-ounce patty. Chewy, with chopped veggies, but still reminiscent of a chicken sausage patty. Spicy.

Calories 110 | **Fat** 3.5 g **Sodium** 350 mg **Fiber** 3 g | **Protein** 10 g

Boca All American Flame Grilled 1

$0.90 per 2½-ounce patty. Tastes grilled, with cheesy and fat flavors.

Calories 120 | **Fat** 4.5 g **Sodium** 350 mg **Fiber** 4 g | **Protein** 15 g

MorningStar Farms Grillers Original 1

$1.20 per 2¼-ounce patty. Grilled flavors with onion and garlic notes. Closest to real meat.

Calories 130 | **Fat** 6 g **Sodium** 260 mg **Fiber** 2 g | **Protein** 15 g

Gardein Beefless Burger 1, 2

$1.25 per 3-ounce patty. Slightly chewy. Caramelized onion and grilled flavors, with a slight bitterness.

Calories 130 | **Fat** 4.5 g **Sodium** 320 mg **Fiber** 2 g | **Protein** 15 g

GOOD

Lightlife Smart Patties Original Burger with Quinoa 1, 2

$1.30 per 2½-ounce patty. Soft, with big browned and onion flavors. Slightly bitter.

Calories 100 | **Fat** 2.5 g **Sodium** 300 mg **Fiber** 3 g | **Protein** 10 g

Beyond Meat Beast Burger 2

$3 per 4-ounce patty. Tastes of garlic, onion, salt, and smoke. Chewy, with spongy interior. Contains pea protein.

Calories 260 | **Fat** 16 g **Sodium** 480 mg **Fiber** 4 g | **Protein** 23 g

Grain-Based and Vegetable-Based

VERY GOOD

Amy's California Light in Sodium 2

$1.45 per 2½-ounce patty. Big mushroom and nutty flavors, slight onion and garlic notes. Crispy exterior and chewy grains.

Calories 110 | **Fat** 4 g **Sodium** 250 mg **Fiber** 3 g | **Protein** 5 g

Trader Joe's Quinoa Cowboy Black Beans & Roasted Corn

$0.90 per 3-ounce patty. Moist and flavorful, with spicy "south of the border" style seasonings.

Calories 180 | **Fat** 8 g **Sodium** 280 mg **Fiber** 6 g | **Protein** 5 g

Amy's All American 1, 2

$1.40 per 2½-ounce patty. Flavorful, with spicy heat and onion, garlic, chili powder, and cumin.

Calories 140 | **Fat** 3.5 g **Sodium** 390 mg **Fiber** 4 g | **Protein** 13 g

Engine 2 Tuscan Kale White Bean 2

$1.70 per 2⅔-ounce patty. Crispy outside and dry overall. Strong garlic flavor. Less salty than most.

Calories 130 | **Fat** 1.5 g **Sodium** 15 mg **Fiber** 4 g | **Protein** 4 g

Amy's California 2

$1.40 per 2½-ounce patty. Big mushroom and nutty flavor. On the salty side.

Calories 150 | **Fat** 5 g **Sodium** 500 mg **Fiber** 4 g | **Protein** 6 g

Dr. Praeger's California 1, 2

$1 per 2¾-ounce patty. Lots of vegetable pieces; tastes mostly of edamame and pea. Moist, but a bit mushy.

Calories 110 | **Fat** 5 g **Sodium** 250 mg **Fiber** 4 g | **Protein** 5 g

Gardenburger The Original 1

$1.20 per 2½-ounce patty. Moist and chewy, crispy exterior. Tastes of mushrooms, cheese, nutty grains. Salty.

Calories 110 | **Fat** 3 g **Sodium** 490 mg **Fiber** 4 g | **Protein** 5 g

GOOD

Hilary's The World's Best 2

$1.80 per 3¼-ounce patty. Mild and sweet cornmeal-like flavor. Hints of onion and garlic. Crispy.

Calories 210 | **Fat** 9 g **Sodium** 340 mg **Fiber** 4 g | **Protein** 5 g

Sunshine Burgers Quarter Pound Original 2

$2.60 per 4-ounce patty. Tastes of grains, sunflower seeds, and vegetables. Slightly sweet and salty.

Calories 360 | **Fat** 21 g **Sodium** 300 mg **Fiber** 6 g | **Protein** 12 g

DeCanto's Best Traditional

$1 per 3-ounce patty. Nutty grain and seed flavors, but slightly bitter, with big, harsh garlic. Less salty than most.

Calories 280 | **Fat** 22 g **Sodium** 105 mg **Fiber** 4 g | **Protein** 10 g

Boca Essentials Roasted Vegetables & Red Quinoa 1

$1 per 2½-ounce patty. Grain and bell-pepper flavors dominate. Slightly bitter. Pungent cheese taste.

Calories 150 | **Fat** 7 g **Sodium** 410 mg **Fiber** 2 g | **Protein** 9 g

PHOTOS: REBEKAH NEMETHY

1 Contains soy. 2 Non-GMO or contains non-GMO ingredients.

COOL BEANS Cold-brew coffee makers, like this Fellow Duo Coffee Steeper, are low-tech and take much of the mess out of the process.

Cold Brew for Hot Days

You'll be singing "bye bye bitter" once you try cold-brew coffee, claim fans who say it's smoother than the traditional stuff. Judge for yourself with our tested brewers.

by Ed Perratore

ONCE FOUND ONLY IN boutique coffeehouses, cold-brew coffee has grown up, with sales rising 115 percent between 2014 and 2015. Starbucks and Peet's now sell it by the cup in their shops, and you can buy ready-to-drink bottled versions from companies such as Stumptown and Slingshot at Whole Foods, specialty grocers, and even some Target stores. Not surprisingly, several appliance makers eager to cash

PHOTOGRAPH BY THE VOORHES

in on the trend sell low-tech systems that take the mess out of mixing up a batch of cold brew at home.

Cold Brew 101

Before we get to what cold-brew coffee is, let's be clear about what it is not. Cold brew is a very different beast from either iced coffee or the bottled coffee products (cappuccino, mochaccino, and other coffee-based drinks) sold at the supermarket. All of those start with standard hot coffee that's then chilled, creating a drink that has all of the bitterness and acidity of regular coffee, just minus the heat.

115%

Sales growth of cold-brew coffee, whether bottled or served in a coffeehouse, from 2014 to 2015.

To mask that bitterness, many coffee drinkers (and manufacturers of the bottled beverages) add heaps of sugar and glugs of milk or cream–and plenty of calories with them. "Some of the bottled coffee products we've tested have as much sugar as a can of soda," says Maxine Siegel, a registered dietitian and manager of food testing at Consumer Reports.

Cold brew, on the other hand, begins with the same beans you'd use for regular coffee, but they're ground more coarsely, then mixed with cold or room-temperature water and left to sit for a very long time: Coaxing flavor out of the grounds with cool water can take 12 to 24 hours or even longer. To avoid a weak, watery drink, cold-brew coffee also requires at least twice the grounds needed for traditional hot brewing, which explains why cold brew can be pricey, whether you buy it at a coffeehouse or supermarket, or whip up a batch at home. (See "Cool Ways to Make Cold Joe," on the facing page.)

Make no mistake: Do-it-yourself cold-brew coffee makers aren't a necessity; they're essentially steeping chambers for the water and grounds. But they make preparing and filtering the coffee neater and less cumbersome. (Trying to make cold-brew coffee using, say, a carafe and cheesecloth can be a messy and tedious affair.) The machines also make it easier to experiment with the ratio of water to coffee until you find the one that produces the cup best-suited to your tastes.

What comes out of most cold-brew coffee makers after all of that steeping isn't ready to enjoy. It's a thick concentrate that you dilute with cold or hot water or milk, depending on the desired temperature and strength, before drinking.

Price of a Pick-Me-Up

comparing the cost of a 16-ounce serving

Price depends on cost per pound of coffee. Using $4.45 national average per pound: $0.75.
• If coffee costs $10 per pound: $1.70.
• At $15 per pound: $2.50.

VS.

You need to buy two 10.5-ounce bottles to make 16 ounces.

VS.

National average.

The Bitter Truth

Why bother with all of the added time and expense of cold brew? Because of how it goes down. Fans say that cold brewing makes for a far smoother drink, without much of the bitterness and acidity of traditional coffee. In fact, a cold-brew coffee and a hot-brew coffee made with identical grounds will have a completely different flavor profile because compounds in the beans react very differently to cold water than they do to hot. (See "The Science of Smooth," on the facing page.)

Cold brew might also be a healthier choice than traditional iced or chilled coffee drinks. Because of its distinctly mild flavor, drinkers are less likely to load up cold brew with milk and sugar–and all of the added calories they bring.

Another selling point of cold-brew coffee is its extended shelf life: It will keep in the refrigerator for up to two weeks. Regularly brewed coffee doesn't store well in the fridge and starts to go stale shortly after it's made because of an aromatic compound that degrades as it cools–all something to keep in mind this summer when you're looking for a pick-me-up that will also cool you down.

PHOTOS: JOHN WALSH

COOL WAYS TO MAKE COLD JOE

The flavor of cold-brew coffee is determined by the quality of the beans and the water, the amount and grind of coffee used, and the length of time the grounds steep. These machines make the process convenient, but unlike with hot brewing, they do not influence the coffee's taste.

BRUER COLD BRUER $80

HOW IT WORKS The Bruer stands out from the others we looked at because its process is flow-through. You place ice and water in the upper chamber, and a drop of water per second drips to the grounds. The extract, ready to drink, collects below, yielding about 20 ounces. (Instructions for concentrate are included.)
PROS The fastest per ounce, with no waiting for coffee to drain once it's brewed. Permanent filter.
CONS Makes among the least amount of drinkable coffee per use. The glass beakers, though easy to clean, can break.

OXO COLD BREW 1272880 $50

HOW IT WORKS Place the container on its stand, and add grounds and water. After 12 to 24 hours, place a glass carafe beneath the stand and flip the "brew-release switch," on the bottom, which lets the concentrated brew drip slowly through the built-in filter and into the carafe.
PROS The brewing chamber can be separated from the stand, and at 7 inches tall, it fits easily into the fridge. The release switch keeps hands clear of the brew.
CONS The lid doesn't seal, as it does on some other models, and the filter clogged badly during one of our batches.

BODYBREW THE BOD $80

HOW IT WORKS Add grounds to the stainless filter basket (in the lower half), then add water. Once you attach the upper half, flip the product upside down, then back, to wet the grounds thoroughly. An optional hour timer will help you keep track of steeping time when you're experimenting.
PROS At 12½ inches, it fits easily into the fridge while steeping; the top chamber can also be replaced with a cover to reduce the height by 3 inches. It comes in black and two solid and three translucent colors.
CONS It can be tricky to assemble.

TODDY COLD BREW SYSTEM $40

HOW IT WORKS The upper chamber's lower recess holds a filter and a stopper. After coffee has steeped, you remove the stopper and the filtered extract fills the glass lower container.
PROS It makes about 48 ounces—the most of these models—which yields twice that much drinkable coffee. The brew chamber is unbreakable plastic and can be used with other containers.
CONS The handle, which wraps around the upper chamber, is flimsy. Removing the stopper can be messy; the filter needs replacing ($3.75 per pair) after about 10 uses.

FELLOW DUO COFFEE STEEPER $100

HOW IT WORKS A stainless steel chamber atop a glass carafe, it lets you make cold-brew or hot coffee. To release coffee through the filter into the carafe, you twist the two parts of the top chamber.
PROS It's small enough, at 15 inches high, to fit into the fridge, and its permanent fine filter ensures no gunk at the bottom of your cup.
CONS If you'd like to fill two 16-ounce travel cups, you're out of luck: This unit and the Bruer make the least cold-brew coffee of the five models—roughly 20 ounces at a time, depending on the strength of the coffee.

The Science of Smooth

STANDARD HOT COFFEE

As any caffeine addict knows, a regular cup of joe starts with hot water (between 195° F and 205° F) and coffee grounds. The water dissolves oils, acids, and other compounds out of the grounds, giving coffee its familiar acidity and eye-opening aroma. The hot water also degrades acids, creating coffee's bitter notes.

VS.

COLD-BREW COFFEE

The absence of hot water means that the oils, acids, and other compounds dissolve much more slowly. The acids also aren't degraded, making for a much smoother beverage, free of bitterness. One downside: This coffee's aroma is barely noticeable because heat is what releases it from the grounds.

PHOTOS: JOHN WALSH

Dishwashers That *Don't* Make a Splash

THE TOP COMPLAINT we get about dishwashers–after noise–is that dishes don't come out dry enough. Now and then, you might shrug off a wet item or two. But when drying dishes with a cloth becomes a regular part of unloading the machine, it's a pain. We hear you. Drying has long been a part of our tests, and we assess each dishwasher's drying performance in the "highs" and "lows" sections for each model rated on ConsumerReports.org. And now we include drying scores in our Ratings.

Dishwashers get items dry in various ways, such as with a fan or an electric coil, by raising water temperatures near the end of a cycle, or a combination. None stand out in our tests as better than another or as a guarantee of dry dishes, so we can't recommend one type. But some models do a better job of drying than others. The ones at right do a good job of drying as well as washing.

We test drying by using plastic cups. That's because plastic cools more quickly than glass or ceramic dishes, so it's more difficult to get completely dry. But you should be able to count on your dishwasher to get everything dry except for some plastic items or curved surfaces, such as the base of a drinking glass, where those little puddles can collect.

One way to improve drying performance is to use a rinse aid. Any of those products should prevent spotting and help water "sheet off" rather than "bead up," according to our past tests. And here's another tip from our testing pros: Empty the bottom rack first. That way, you avoid spilling water from the top rack onto items below that are already dry. *–Ed Perratore*

LEARN

Online subscribers can go to ConsumerReports.org/dishwashers for our complete dishwasher Ratings.

Ratings: Top Dishwashers That Dry Well

Of the more than 160 dishwashers we tested, these 22 earned top scores overall, meaning they got dishes clean (which we consider a dishwasher's most important function) and earned an Excellent or Very Good for drying. Bonus: Many of these models are very well-priced.

☑ CR Best Buy ☑ Recommended ● Excellent ◓ Very Good ○ Good ◒ Fair ● Poor

Recommended	Rank	BRAND & MODEL	PRICE	SCORE	TEST RESULTS						FEATURES		
					Washing	Drying	Energy Use	Noise	Ease of Use	Cycle Time (Min.)	Stainless/ SS-Look Option	Hidden Controls	Displays Remaining Time
☑	1	**KitchenAid** KDTM354DSS	$1,000	85	●	●	●	◓	◓	125	•	Some	
☑	2	**Bosch** Ascenta SHX3AR7[5]UC	$630	81	●	◓	●	◓	◓	95	•	•	
	3	**Thermador** Topaz Series DWHD640JFM	$1,500	80	●	●	◓	●	◓	125	•	•	
	4	**Bosch** 800 Plus Series SHX7PT55UC	$1,300	80	●	●	●	◓	◓	125	•	•	•
	5	**Bosch** 500 Series SHP65T55UC	$900	80	●	●	●	◓	◓	125	•	•	
	6	**Bosch** 300 Series DLX SHX53TL5UC	$600	80	●	●	●	○	◓	125	•	•	
	7	**Bosch** 800 Series SHE68T55UC	$950	79	●	●	●	◓	◓	125	•		
	8	**Miele** Futura Classic Plus G4925US	$1,000	79	●	◓	●	◓	◓	150	•		•
	9	**Blomberg** DWT55300SS	$850	79	●	●	●	○	◓	130	•	•	
	10	**Viking** 100 Series FDW101	$800	79	●	●	●	○	◓	130	•	•	
	11	**Maytag** MDB8979SEZ	$850	78	●	◓	◓	◓	●	155	•	Some	
	12	**Thermador** Emerald Series DWHD440MFM	$1,300	78	◓	●	◓	◓	◓	130	•	•	
	13	**KitchenAid** Architect Series II KDTE554CSS	$1,600	78	●	◓	◓	◓	○	145	•	Some	
	14	**Miele** Futura Crystal G6165SCVISF	$1,400	78	●	●	◓	◓	◓	150	•	•	•
	15	**Kenmore** 13693	$720	78	●	●	●	○	◓	160	•	Some	•
	16	**Kenmore** 13223	$600	77	●	●	●	○	◓	160	•		•
	17	**GE** Café CDT725SSFSS	$1,000	77	◓	◓	●	○	◓	145	•	•	•
	18	**GE** GDT580SSFSS	$720	76	●	●	●	◓	◓	155	•	•	•
	19	**Thermador** DWHD651JFP	$2,200	76	◓	●	◓	◓	◓	120	•	•	•
	20	**Kenmore** 13202	$500	75	●	●	●	○	◓	155			•
	21	**Bosch** 800 Plus Series SHE9PT55UC	$1,900	75	◓	●	●	●	◓	130	•	Some	•
	22	**Whirlpool** WDT720PADM	$540	75	●	●	●	◓	◓	155	•	•	•

TAKING A BITE OUT OF APPLE?

WITH THE LAUNCH of the Galaxy S7 and the S7 edge, Samsung now owns the top two spots in our smartphone Ratings. (Three if you count the S5; Apple's iPhone 6s comes in seventh.) As our tests revealed, Samsung has set a new standard in performance and design, generating the kind of buzz once reserved for Apple. The best features include:

- **Excellent battery-life scores.** Both phones logged more than 24 hours of simulated talk time. (That's about twice the number we tallied for the iPhone 6s.)
- **A standout camera.** Despite the downsizing in resolution to 12.2 megapixels from the 15.9 megapixels in the Galaxy S6 (No. 5 in our Ratings), the S7s produced excellent image quality and very good 1080p video quality.
- **Crystal-clear screens.** The sleek glass and aluminum phones feature quad HD displays that present images at several times the resolution of the iPhone 6s. (The S7 has a 5.1-inch screen, slightly larger than the 4.7-inch version of the 6s. And the edge's display is a phablet-sized 5.5 inches.)
- **True water resistance.** Both models can survive a 30-minute dunk in 5 feet of water. And they can do so without requiring you to plug the USB charging port with a flap, as some competitors do.
- **The return of the microSD slot.** Those high-quality videos and images require big data files, all the more reason to appreciate the reappearance of the microSD slot (absent from the Galaxy S6). It lets you add storage capacity to your phone by using an inexpensive memory card.

When you put all of those things together, Samsung's dynamic duo moves to the front of the line. Is that enough to make Apple's intensely loyal fans switch ecosystems? Probably not. But it sure might make them envious. *–Mike Gikas*

BEFORE & AFTER

We originally gave these products bottom-of-the-barrel Ratings. Now they've improved enough to be reconsidered–or even recommended.

A SAFER STROLLER

The Product
The Graco Ready-2Grow Classic Connect LX stroller.

The Problem
Intermittent brake failure in our tests of 2014 models earned this product a "Don't Buy" designation.

The Update
Models were updated to meet new federal standards and now pass our tests, so we have lifted the "Don't Buy" advice.

A (SLIGHTLY) SMARTER SCALE

The Product
Qardio's QardioBase bathroom scale.

The Problem
It consistently added 6 to 10 pounds to the actual weight.

The Update
We retested it after the manufacturer said the glitch was fixed. The scale now shaves 1 percent off the actual weight. So it's still not accurate—but may be a hit with consumers.

A WORTHIER WASHER

The Product
LG's WM3170CW front-loading washer.

The Problem
A software bug made the machine stingy with water, leaving clothes dirty.

The Update
After our tests, LG fixed the problem. The washer now gets an excellent overall Rating. And at $720, it's half the price of other recommended front-loaders.

RECALLS

Act now if you own one of these potentially hazardous products

METAL WALL PLATES

About 374,000 decorative metal wall outlet covers are being recalled by Liberty Hardware because they can dislodge and short-circuit the outlet, posing a risk of electrical shock or fire. They were sold at Lowe's stores and online from 2013 through early 2016 for $5 to $27.
What to do Remove the plate and contact Liberty Hardware at 844-811-4541 or libertyhardware.com for a refund.

ELECTRIC GRIDDLES

Walmart is recalling about 330,000 Rival brand electric griddles because the heating element can crack and water can get inside, posing a shock hazard when you plug the griddle into an outlet. The griddles were sold in Walmart stores and online in 2015 for about $20.
What to do Contact Walmart at 800-925-6278 or walmart.com for a refund.

LAPTOP BATTERIES

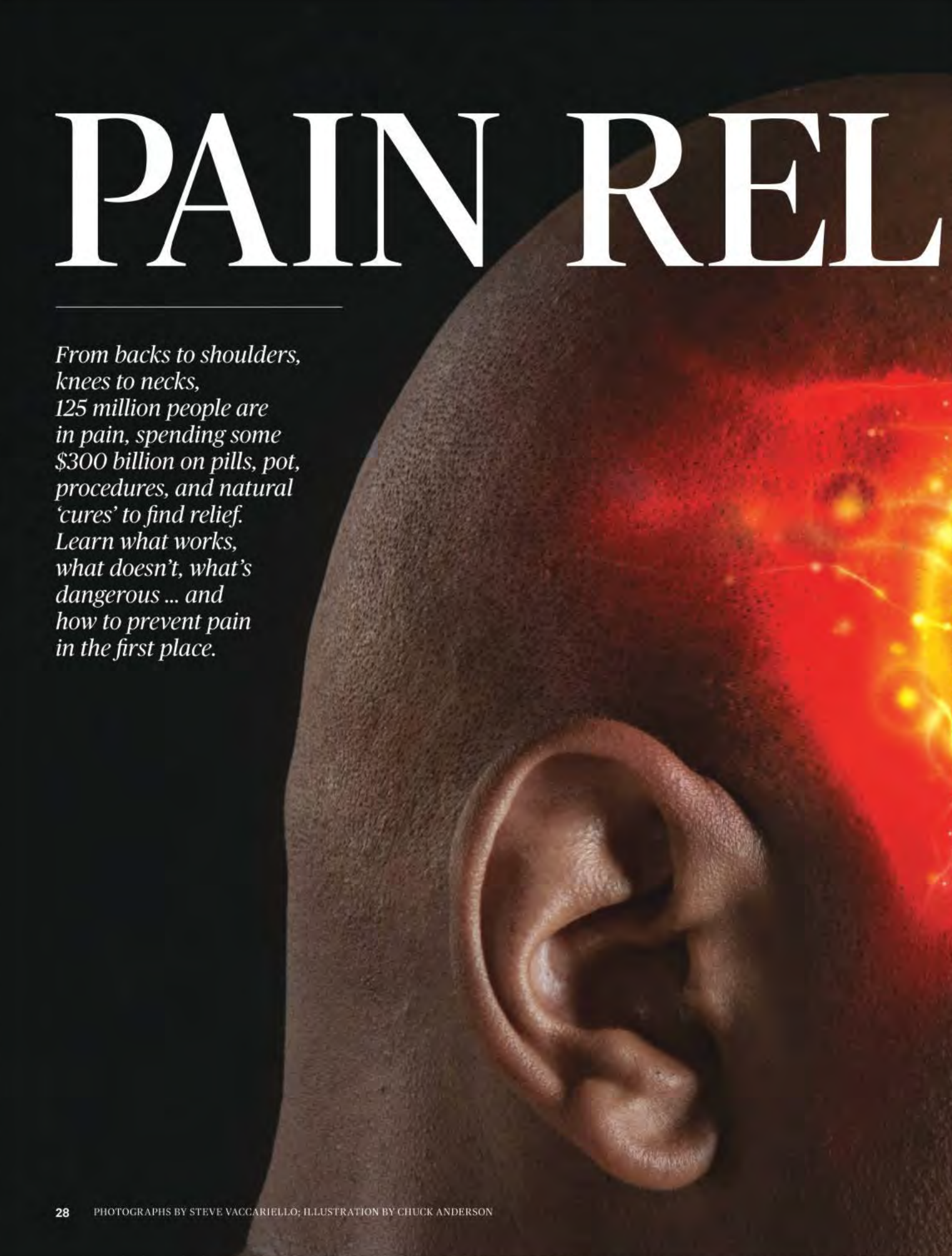
About 91,000 Panasonic lithium-ion battery packs used in Toshiba laptop computers have been recalled because they can overheat, creating a risk of fire or burns. The batteries came installed in some Toshiba Portégé, Satellite, and Tecra laptops and were also sold separately from June 2011 through January 2016.
What to do Use the laptop only when it's plugged into an outlet until you check to see whether your battery should be replaced, free of charge. Call 866-224-1346 or go to batterycheck.toshiba.com.

OFFICE CHAIRS

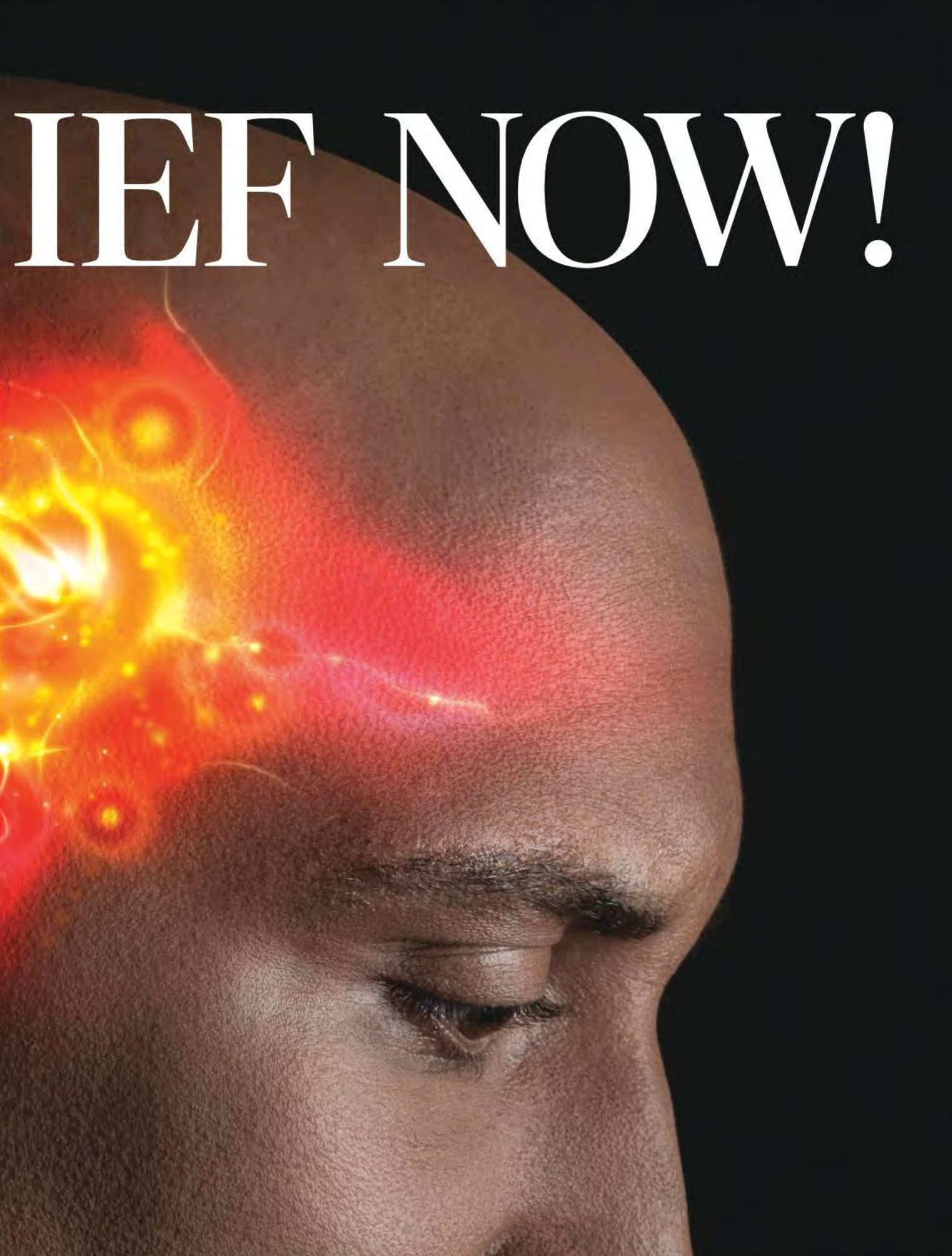
Office Depot is recalling about 300,000 Crawley II executive chairs because the seat plate can crack, causing you to fall out of the chair. They were sold at Office Depot and OfficeMax stores and online from October 2012 through September 2015 for about $140.
What to do Call 855-743-7701 or go to officedepot.com for a free new plate.

PAIN REL

From backs to shoulders, knees to necks, 125 million people are in pain, spending some $300 billion on pills, pot, procedures, and natural 'cures' to find relief. Learn what works, what doesn't, what's dangerous ... and how to prevent pain in the first place.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEVE VACCARIELLO; ILLUSTRATION BY CHUCK ANDERSON


IEF NOW!

IN THE SUMMER of 2014, Carolyn Slutsky was walking to a friend's graduation party when she felt a sudden burst of pain. The sensation radiated down her lower back to her right leg and worsened with each step she took. By the time she arrived at the party, she could barely stand. She went to an urgent-care center on the Upper West Side of New York City the next morning, where a doctor injected her with what she described as "some heavy pain medications" and gave her the name of a massage therapist.

The massage therapist "pounded on my back," Slutsky recalls. "He kept saying, 'See? Better!' But it was not better." She tried over-the-counter pain relievers, which helped for a few weeks until one morning the pain returned with a vengeance. She went to a back specialist who recommended an MRI, which revealed a ruptured spinal disk. The doctor then gave Slutsky a list of physical therapists.

The first one passed her off to his students, who did a poor job explaining the exercises. Slutsky quickly abandoned the treatment and started her own quest to find relief. Following the suggestions of friends, she tried self-help books and acupuncture. Neither worked.

Eventually, she picked another physical therapist from her list who turned things around. He recommended a special pillow to help her sit properly and taught her exercises that in time eliminated her pain. "Going through this made me feel fallible," she says of her experience. "I was in this situation that felt out of control."

Persistent pain can be as frustrating as it is debilitating. As Slutsky or anyone else with prolonged suffering can tell you, there's never a convenient time for a spinal injury, a migraine, or an arthritis flare-up. Pain can take over your life with little notice. It can disappear suddenly, then return just when you think you've beaten it. In some cases, the cause is clear; in others, it's a mystery. Yet when your head is pounding, your joints are aching, or your back is sending lightning bolts of agony up your spine, it's a natural impulse to reach for the first thing you can find that will make the pain go away.

That's why Americans spend some $300 billion on pain treatments and care each year. And then there's the cost of lost productivity, which according to a 2011 Institute of Medicine report runs about $315 billion annually.

"Pain is a part of all of our lives at some point," says Robert D. Kerns, Ph.D., a professor of psychiatry, neurology, and psychology at Yale University and the former national program director for pain management for the Veterans Health Administration. "But for too many Americans, it's a hugely underappreciated problem that deeply impacts quality of life."

An Epidemic of Painkiller Use

America is in the midst of a national conversation about pain and pain relief. There's broad recognition that overuse of opioid painkillers such as Percocet and Vicodin have led to an epidemic of overdoses and addiction. More than 14,000 Americans died of overdoses involving prescription opioids in 2014, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and each day more than 1,000 people are treated in emergency rooms for misusing those drugs.

In March the CDC issued its first-ever guidelines for prescribing opioids for chronic pain, advising doctors to initially try nondrug treatments or use medications other than opioids for people in chronic pain. Other than for those with cancer or those who require palliative or end-of-life care, the CDC also advised doctors to use opioids only for patients when the benefits outweigh the risks, and even then, to use the lowest effective dose. President Barack Obama's proposed budget for the 2017 fiscal year includes $1.1 billion to go toward treatment for prescription drug and heroin abuse. And in an unprecedented move,

'TELL ME HOW MUCH IT HURTS'

It's difficult to find the right words to describe pain intensity. That's why getting the right treatment starts with effective communication.

Pain treatment isn't one size fits all, so doctors often press patients for more details. "Pain is subjective," says Kathleen Cowling, D.O., director of the residency program at Central Michigan University and an emergency physician at the Covenant Medical Center in Saginaw, Mich. "I can't measure it like I would blood pressure." Here's what to tell your doctor:

HOW INTENSE IT IS
You'll first be asked to rate your pain, usually on a scale of 0 (no pain) to 10 (the worst you've ever had). Otherwise, say that it feels mild, moderate, intense, or the maximum—the worse pain possible.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
Is the pain sharp and stabbing, a dull ache or throbbing? It could be from injuries to muscles, tendons, bones, or ligaments, such as a pulled

the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) announced in February an initiative that includes changes in how it regulates and approves opioid drugs.

The aim of the guidelines is to curb inappropriate prescriptions of opioids, says Roger Chou, M.D., a professor of medicine at Oregon Health & Science University in Portland, who helped write them. He notes that they're targeted to primary care providers, who are responsible for almost half of all opioid prescriptions in the U.S. "People with treatable conditions are not getting the relief they need," he says, "and they are dying taking the drugs their doctor prescribed for them."

How the Body Heals Itself

As we acknowledge the dangers of prescription painkillers, we must also come to terms with a more nuanced understanding of pain itself. It isn't something to simply get rid of; it's your body's way of telling you that something is wrong, often a strong signal to stop what you're doing and correct course accordingly.

Beyond the immediate warning, pain triggers a cascade of responses from within. Inflammation at the point of injury alerts the body's immune system to get to work on healing. Other chemicals are then notified and rush in to ward off infection, devour dead cells and tissue, and keep inflammation in check.

For most aches or injuries, pain goes away with treatment and time. When it doesn't, the situation can get tricky. Doctors may find themselves at a loss, and patients can get caught in a cycle of treatments or succumb to the promise of unproven remedies. Others may handle it with a long-term prescription.

But real pain relief isn't measured in doses. It's about listening to what your body is trying to tell you, then patiently addressing the underlying cause. For Carolyn Slutsky, that meant finding the right physical therapist and changing her daily routine. "I try not to lift heavy things," she says. "I lighten my bag by carrying only what I need. And I get out of bed putting the weight on my hands rather than my lower back."

If you're in pain, don't just mask it or ignore it; do something. We've put together a glossary of treatments to help you understand the options. We've also looked closely at the best scientific evidence to create a step-by-step treatment guide to the most common causes of pain.

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muscle, a torn tendon, or an inflamed joint. Tingling, burning, pinpricks, or shooting pain that feels like a shock can indicate pinched or damaged nerves.

IT HURTS WHERE
Identify where it hurts and whether pain spreads to other areas. Neck pain that radiates to your left arm could signal a problem with disks that cushion your spinal column.

WHAT MAKES IT BETTER
If you've had pain for a while, explain what methods you've used to treat it and whether they worked.

WHEN IT STARTED
The last piece of information to give your doctor is about the first time you noticed the pain. Be precise, and describe what you were doing at the time you first noticed it. For example, neck pain that worsens during exercise could be a clogged artery.

For patients who have trouble articulating their pain level, doctors may use the Wong-Baker FACES Pain Rating Scale. It was developed in the early 1980s to help children point to a face and communicate. Today it's also used for adults, especially older people.

WONG-BAKER FACES FOUNDATION (2015)

GETTING TO 'AHHHHHHHH'

An extensive toolkit of pills and practices is available to pain sufferers today. But be sure you understand the limitations—and risks—of your choices.

Ancient Romans thought that jolting the temples of headache sufferers with electric shocks from live torpedo fish would make the pain vanish. It's not clear whether zapping a person with fishy electricity was helpful or if it simply gave the victim another source of agony to focus on. But it didn't take humans long to discover other sources of pain relief. By 1300 B.C., the Inca in Peru had discovered that coca leaves—the source of cocaine—could numb pain when chewed or applied to wounds. By that time, people in Asia and Egypt had learned to extract opium from the poppy plant, creating the earliest version of an opioid pain drug, similar to what we use today (think hydrocodone and oxycodone). We have (mostly) moved beyond electric fish to other treatments that can alleviate or reduce pain. Here's our overview of some common pain treatments and the conditions for which they work best.

Acetaminophen

Found in more than 600 prescription and over-the-counter products, medicine such as Tylenol and its generic versions are among the most often used drugs in the U.S. Acetaminophen isn't as effective at relieving pain as drugs like ibuprofen (Advil and generic) or naproxen (Aleve and generic), according to an analysis by Consumer Reports Best Buy Drugs. But it won't put you at risk for stomach bleeding and a heart attack or stroke the way those two drugs do. In fact, it's easier on the gut and is a good option for those who suffer from acid reflux or ulcers. But its overuse is the leading cause of liver damage, sending almost 80,000 people per year to an ER. That can happen if you take only slightly more than the Food and Drug Administration's maximum recommended dose of 4,000 mg in a 24-hour period, and is especially worrisome if you're a heavy drinker or if you have liver disease. Our medical experts say limit use to no more than 3,250 mg within 24 hours.

Acupuncture

Legend has it that in 200 B.C., a Chinese soldier shot with an arrow noticed a "good" side effect: His pain from a previous injury disappeared. But acupuncture's exact origins remain a mystery. And there's still uncertainty about its ability to treat pain. Some evidence suggests that it can ease lower back, neck, and knee pain, and reduce the frequency of headaches and migraines. Multiple studies have compared real acupuncture, in which thin needles are inserted into specific points on the body, with sham acupuncture, in which the needles don't break the skin or are inserted in random spots on the body. A few studies have suggested that real acupuncture was sometimes slightly better, but many found that the sham procedure was just as effective, and both were more effective than no treatment at all. Treatment should be done only by a licensed practitioner who uses sterile needles.

Aspirin, Ibuprofen, and Naproxen

On any given day, about 17 million Americans take one of those pain relievers, which are called nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs). Available from big brands (Advil, Aleve, Bayer) as well as in generic versions, they work by blocking the production of substances called prostaglandins that trigger pain and inflammation. Both over-the-counter and prescription versions of NSAIDs work best on tension headaches, mild migraines, lower back pain, osteoarthritis, and pain associated with muscle soreness or swelling. If you take an NSAID more than 10 days in a row, ask your doctor for an alternative, because taking too much or taking them too often can cause bleeding in the intestines, kidney failure, heart attacks (though naproxen possibly poses less risk for that), stomach ulcers, and stroke. Aspirin is the exception; when used for pain relief, it can cause stomach bleeding even at low doses.

Biofeedback

The theory is that you can control pain by using such techniques as deep breathing or muscle relaxation to consciously control or monitor otherwise involuntary bodily functions such as heart rate, skin temperature, muscle tension, or blood pressure. The jury is still out on whether biofeedback works, though experts think it might help people by simply teaching them how to relax. And several large reviews have found it works best for conditions sometimes brought on by stress, such as backaches, migraines, and tension headaches. One advantage is that biofeedback is generally free of risks and side effects.

Botox Injections

At very low doses, this powerful natural toxin temporarily blocks nerve signals and paralyzes muscles, preventing them from contracting. The treatment is FDA-approved to help prevent migraines in people who have 15 or more each month. It requires undergoing up to 31 injections in different areas of the head and neck every three months. But studies have found that the results are modest. People getting Botox shots had one or two fewer headache-days per month than those getting placebo injections. Some doctors also treat tension headaches and less frequent migraines with Botox, but the American Academy of Neurology doesn't recommend it for those cases because large-scale studies show it doesn't help.

Chiropractic Care

This hands-on therapy, in which a person's spine and other parts of the body are manipulated to alleviate pain and promote healing, dates back to ancient China and Greece. Modern chiropractors perform "adjustments," which use a strong, controlled force to manipulate the spine or joints to improve alignment and restore mobility. There's good evidence that chiropractic

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MICHAEL BRANDON MYERS

care helps alleviate lower back pain, including some suggesting that it works as well as medication. A 2010 comprehensive review found that the therapy may be helpful with joint, neck, and shoulder pain, and tension headaches. In a 2011 online survey of more than 45,000 Consumer Reports subscribers, 65 percent of those who had chiropractic care said it helped.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

Several large studies show that CBT can help prevent migraines and neck pain, and ease chronic low back pain. This form of psychological counseling, or talk therapy—combined with behavior changes—helps ease pain by teaching coping and relaxation skills. Most important is instruction on how to short-circuit negative thoughts, which can intensify pain sensations. Negative emotions such as anxiety, depression, and fear stimulate chemicals in the brain involved in pain perception, so reducing them not only helps you feel better mentally but also helps you hurt less.

Glucosamine and Chondroitin

These popular supplements, often used in combination, are said to help protect cartilage and ease joint pain and swelling. But there's little evidence that they ease arthritis pain or improve joint function. And they could pose risks, including increased blood glucose (sugar) levels. Other side effects can include a heightened risk of bleeding when taken with blood thinners, worsening high blood pressure, or possibly triggering abnormal heart rhythms. The American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons doesn't recommend glucosamine or chondroitin.

Massage

Tomb paintings show that ancient Egyptians used massage as part of their medical practices, and some massage schools still use Chinese instructional texts dating to 2700 B.C. A few studies have shown that massage helps alleviate headaches and muscle or joint pain in the back, hip, knees, and neck. Before trying it, confirm with your doctor that it won't be harmful for your condition. Your massage practitioner should be licensed by your state and certified by a national organization, such as the American Massage Therapy Association.

Muscle-Pain Creams and Patches

Popular drugstore products such as Bengay and Icy Hot contain chemicals called counterirritants (such as capsicum and methyl salicylate) that can create a feeling of heat, and menthol, which triggers a cooling sensation. In both cases, the active ingredients inflame the area near the pain, which stimulates the nerves and creates a milder sensation, distracting you from the pain you're trying to treat. There's little evidence they actually address the underlying pain, though some people still might find relief. This isn't the same as using ice, which can reduce inflammation.

Muscle Relaxants

Prescription medications such as cyclobenzaprine (Fexmid and generic) and metaxalone (Skelaxin and generic) are used to treat back and neck pain, and other conditions caused by muscle spasms. But studies have failed to show that they work well for chronic pain. Reserve muscle relaxants for acute, severe neck or back spasms, or muscle spasticity associated with cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis, or a stroke. For short-term pain, they can be an option if you have liver disease or can't tolerate acetaminophen or ibuprofen. People ages 65 and older should steer clear of muscle relaxants because they're associated with an increased risk of falling.

Oxycodone and Hydrocodone

These opioid narcotic painkillers (OxyContin, Percocet, Vicodin, and their generics) work by attaching to receptors in the brain, spinal cord, and elsewhere in the body and blocking pain signals sent to the brain. But they don't directly treat the problem causing the pain. And the drugs can be highly addictive. An analysis of 39 studies involving people with chronic pain who took opioids found that the drugs didn't relieve their pain over the long term but did increase their risk of overdose, compared with those who took a placebo. If you must take an opioid, limit it to just a few days for short-term pain relief—after surgery, for example. Otherwise, skip them. Even when used for a short period, opioids can cause side effects including abdominal cramps, constipation, nausea, sedation, and vomiting.

Physical Therapy

In the early part of the 20th century, therapists began to exercise the limbs of bedridden polio patients to rehabilitate them and relieve their pain. During World War II, wounded soldiers were treated with electrical stimulation, massage, and hydrotherapy. Today, physical therapists use similar hands-on techniques such as massaging muscles and moving joints through their range of motion, along with exercises to improve strength and flexibility. Multiple studies have shown that physical therapy can help relieve joint pain as well as chronic lower back and neck pain when it includes an exercise component.

Steroid Injections

For lower back pain, corticosteroids are injected into the spine between the vertebrae and the protective covering of the spinal cord (the epidural space), to temporarily reduce inflammation around an irritated nerve. But they're not approved by the FDA for that use, though doctors can still use it. The shots can also offer modest, short-term relief for neck and shoulder pain, and back pain that also travels down a leg. There's a risk of an epidural abscess (which can cause incontinence, urinary retention, fever, and paradoxically, back pain), and the FDA warns of rare but serious side effects, including vision loss, a stroke, paralysis, and even death.

TENS

A modern version of the Ancient Romans' use of electric fish, TENS, or transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation, is available without a prescription. A small battery-operated device sends electrical currents through electrodes placed on areas that hurt. It appears to be safe, but whether it reduces pain is still up in the air. Some research suggests it helps, but others haven't found a benefit.

Sumatriptan and Rizatriptan

Those drugs (Imitrex and Maxalt), known as triptans, can fight migraine pain by temporarily narrowing dilated blood vessels, and can relieve severe pain in about 2 hours. But they aren't recommended for people with uncontrolled high blood pressure, heart disease, chest pain, or peripheral vascular disease because they can worsen those conditions and possibly cause a heart attack.

SOOTHING STRATEGIES

Applying the right medications and methods at the right time can help to reduce and even stop pain

LOWER BACK

You've got pain in the lumbar region, the area spanning the middle of your back to your tailbone. It ranges from a dull, constant ache to a sudden, sharp pain. About 80 percent of adults suffer from lower back pain at some point, and it affects more women than men.

WHAT CAUSES IT

Back pain can stem from an injury, such as muscle strain from lifting a heavy object. Or it can be caused by wear and tear on the joints, disks, and ligaments that hold the spine in place. Chronic back pain often arises from disks that have degenerated. That can result in "slipped" (or herniated) disks that can bulge and press on nerves. Sometimes slipped disks allow the spine's bones (vertebrae), which are otherwise normally supported in place by the disks, to slide on top of each other and also irritate nerves. Osteoporosis (a condition that causes weak and brittle bones) can cause compression fractures that can also lead to lower back pain.

TREAT IT FIRST WITH

Any kind of gentle movement will help: walking, swimming, or yoga, for example. That can reduce pain and speed recovery, according to the independent research group Cochrane Library, which conducted a large analysis of 61 back-pain studies. For more relief, an NSAID pain reliever like ibuprofen (Advil and generic) or naproxen (Aleve and generic) can help.

IF THAT DOESN'T WORK

Most cases of lower back pain resolve themselves within four weeks. If your back doesn't get better, see a doctor. The pain could be a symptom of an underlying condition such as arthritis, fibromyalgia, or osteoporosis. If that's not the case, your doctor may recommend a hands-on treatment, such as chiropractic, massage, or physical therapy.

GET TO AN EMERGENCY ROOM

If you experience weakness or sudden urinary or bowel incontinence, or if pain is so severe that you can't drive or use stairs, you need urgent help. Seek care immediately for your current back pain if you've had a previous back injury or a severe fall, or you've had cancer.

NEVER DO THIS

Bed rest should be avoided; it can prolong recovery. Also skip back-support braces and patches, balms, and creams such as Bengay or Icy Hot; they haven't been shown to help. Consider back surgery only if your pain is clearly linked to a herniated disk or spinal stenosis (the narrowing of the spinal column) that hasn't improved with other treatment after several months.

PREVENT IT IN THE FIRST PLACE

Avoid any exercise that causes you to stretch your back to the point of discomfort. Bend at the knees when lifting a heavy object, and keep it close to your body with your knees slightly bent as you hold it. Practice good posture: Don't slump when you sit, and use the muscles in your shoulders and abdomen to maintain your spine in a neutral position. Do exercises to strengthen the core muscles supporting your spine, and your abdominal, back, and hip muscles.

People with back pain sometimes also suffer from depression. Treating the depression can lessen the pain because the same chemical messengers in the brain influence your mood and how you perceive pain. The antidepressant duloxetine (Cymbalta and generic) is FDA-approved for treating chronic lower back pain. A word of warning: The drug can cause rare but serious side effects, including lowered blood pressure (leading to dizziness and falls) and a risk of liver failure.

JOINTS (knees, hips)

Stiff or swollen joints can result in pain, especially first thing in the morning and after resting.

WHAT CAUSES IT

The most common form of joint pain, osteoarthritis, is a breakdown of cartilage that lines and cushions joints. It's more common in older people but can develop sooner in those who have had a joint injury or do continuous high-impact, vigorous activities that involve pounding on the joints. Being overweight can also stress joints, increasing wear and tear on the knees and hips.

TREAT IT FIRST WITH

Try gentle exercise. A review of 32 studies found that it relieves knee pain as well as medication. Low-impact activities were most effective. Try walking or swimming combined with stretching and strengthening activities. Also consider acupuncture. Although the evidence about its efficacy is mixed, in a Consumer Reports survey almost half of those who tried acupuncture for osteoarthritis said that it helped. For pain flare-ups, try over-the-counter NSAID medications, such as ibuprofen or naproxen. You may find relief from applying hot or cold packs, or topical preparations that cause heating or cooling sensations. (But don't do both heat and topicals; you risk getting burned.)

IN THIS SPECIAL SECTION

34a Streaming Media Players

34b Dishwashers

34c Recalls

34d Autos

34d Contact Info

✔ **CR Best Buy** Products with this icon offer the best combination of performance and price. All are recommended.

✔ **Recommended** Models with this designation perform well and stand out for reasons we note.

How to Use the Canada Extra Section

Every month, Canada Extra provides Canadian pricing and availability information about products tested for that issue. The Ratings in this section are based on this month's reports, but they narrow your choices to the products that are sold in Canada.

You can use this section in either of two ways: Start with the main report, read about the products that interest you, and turn to this section to find whether they're sold–and for what price–in Canada. Or start here, find products sold in Canada whose price and overall score appear promising, and read more about them in the main report and full Ratings chart; page numbers appear with each Canadian report. (For some products, the Canadian model designation differs slightly from the one used in the U.S.)

In most cases, the prices we list here are the approximate retail in Canadian dollars; manufacturers' list prices are indicated by an asterisk (*). Check marks identify CR Best Buys or recommended products in the U.S. Ratings. "NA" in a chart means that information wasn't available from the manufacturer. We include, in the Contact Info list on page 34d, the manufacturer's phone number and Web address in Canada so that you can call or go online to get information on a model you can't find in the stores. (Many products that aren't available in Canadian stores can be bought online.)

We appreciate your support, but we don't take it for granted. Please write to CanadaExtra@cu.consumer.org and tell us what you think. We can't reply to every email message or implement every suggestion, but with your help we'll try to keep growing to serve your needs.

Streaming Media Players

Seven of the tested streaming media players are available. **Report and Ratings, pages 15-19**

Rec.	Rank	BRAND & MODEL	PRICE	SCORE
✔	2	**Roku** 3 (2nd gen.)	$110	**76**
✔	3	**Roku** 2 (2nd gen.)	$80	**72**
✔	6	**Roku** 1	$60	**69**
✔	7	**Google** Chromecast (2nd gen.)	$45	**69**
✔	8	**Roku** Streaming Stick (HDMI Version)	$60	**68**
✔	10	**Apple** TV (64GB) (4th gen.)	$290	**67**
✔	14	**Apple** TV (3rd gen.)	$100	**61**

Dishwashers

Nineteen of the tested dishwashers that were judged best at drying dishes are available. **Report and Ratings, page 26**

Rec.	Rank	BRAND & MODEL	PRICE	SCORE
☑	1	**KitchenAid** KDTM345ESS	$1,550	**85**
✔	2	**Bosch** Ascenta SHX3AR7[5]UC	$1,000	**81**
	3	**Thermador** Topaz Series DWHD640JFM	NA	**80**
	4	**Bosch** 800 Plus Series SHX7PT55UC	$2,200	**80**
	5	**Bosch** 500 Series SHP65T55UC	$1,700	**80**
	6	**Bosch** 300 Series DLX SHX53TL5UC	$1,500	**80**
	7	**Bosch** 800 Series SHE68T55UC	$1,800	**79**
	8	**Miele** Futura Classic Plus G4925US	$1,600	**79**
	9	**Blomberg** DWT55300SS	NA	**79**

Rec.	Rank	BRAND & MODEL	PRICE	SCORE
	10	**Viking** 100 Series FDW101	NA	**79**
	11	**Maytag** MDB8979SEZ	$1,200	**78**
	12	**Thermador** Emerald Series DWHD440MFM	NA	**78**
	14	**Miele** Futura Crystal G6165SCVISF	$1,950	**78**
	17	**GE** Café CDT725SSFSS	$1,500	**77**
	18	**GE** GDT580SSFSS	$1,000	**76**
	19	**Thermador** DWHD651JFP	NA	**76**
	20	**Kenmore** 13202	$700	**75**
	21	**Bosch** 800 Plus Series SHE9PT55UC	$2,900	**75**
	22	**Whirlpool** WDT720PADM	$700	**75**

Canada Extra on the Web

Canada Extra information can be found on ConsumerReports.org, our website, along with the current issue of the magazine and more. Once there, click on the "Canada Extra" link on the opening screen. There you can see which reports have Canadian information available.

Recalls

2002-2010 Lexus and Toyota models
On certain vehicles, the passenger frontal airbag inflator could produce excessive internal pressure during deployment, which may cause the inflator to rupture and allow fragments to be propelled toward vehicle occupants. That could also damage the airbag module, preventing proper deployment during a crash (where deployment is warranted). Note: This recall supersedes recalls 2013113, 2014224, 2015197, and 2015269.
Models 400,124 2002-2010 Lexus SC 430 vehicles; and 2003-2008 Toyota Corolla, 2003-2008 Matrix, 2002-2007 Sequoia, and 2003-2006 Tundra vehicles.
What to Do All vehicles that have not received a replacement inflator as part of a previous recall will have a replacement inflator installed by dealers. For Matrix models, dealers may replace the front passenger airbag assembly with one equipped with a newly specified inflator.

2006-2012 Toyota Rav4 models
On certain vehicles, in the event of a severe frontal collision, there is a possibility that the webbing of the seat belt in both second-row outboard seating positions could contact a portion of the metal seat cushion frame, become cut, and separate. If that occurs, the seat belt may not properly restrain the occupant.
Models 148,966 vehicles.
What to Do Have the dealer install plastic protectors on the seat cushion frame in both second-row outboard seating positions.

2006-2014 Audi and Volkswagen models
On certain vehicles, the driver frontal airbag inflator could produce excessive internal pressure during deployment, which may cause the inflator to rupture and allow fragments to be propelled toward vehicle occupants. That could also damage the airbag module, preventing proper deployment during a crash (where deployment is warranted).
Models 79,482 2006-2013 Audi A3, 2007-2009 A4, 2010-2013 Audi A5, and 2009-2012 Q5 vehicles; and 2010-2011 Volkswagen Cabriolet, 2009-2014 CC, 2012-2014 Eos, 2010-2013 Golf, 2008 Golf City, 2010-2013 GTI, 2006-2014 Passat, 2009 Rabbit, and 2010 Tiguan vehicles.
What to Do Have the dealer replace the front driver airbag inflator. Note: This affects only the Cabriolet version of the Audi A4 and A5 models.

2011-2016 Dodge Charger models
On certain vehicles equipped with an original equipment spare tire, the body-side sill assemblies may deform during tire jack use if wheel chocks are not used as instructed in the owner's manual. That could cause the vehicle to become unstable and the jack to fail.
Models 19,005 vehicles.
What to Do Have the dealer provide wheel chocks. The wheel chocks will be installed with the vehicle's spare tire in such a manner that they must be removed before the spare tire is removed from its stowed location.

2013-2016 Scion FR-S models
On certain vehicles with an automatic transmission and an ignition key, the key interlock connectors, which are disabled during transport to avoid damage to the transmission, may not have been connected during pre-delivery service at dealers or distributors. That could allow the ignition key to be removed in a gear other than Park and could cause unintended vehicle movement.
Models 2,247 vehicles.
What to Do Have the dealer inspect the delivery mode connectors and, if necessary, connect them.

2014 Nissan Rogue models
On certain vehicles, improper nickel plating of certain fuel pump internal components could contaminate the pump, potentially resulting in an inoperative fuel pump. That could result in a no-start condition or an engine stall without warning and without the ability to restart the vehicle.
Models 12,193 vehicles.
What to Do Have the dealer replace the fuel pump. Note: This is an expansion of Recall 2015-140.

2014-2015 Mazda CX-5 models
On certain vehicles, the fuel filler pipe ruptured during rear-impact crash testing, causing excessive fuel spillage. As a result, a collision involving the rear of the vehicle could result in a fuel leak. Fuel leakage, in the presence of an ignition source, could result in a fire.
Models 48,412 vehicles.
What to Do Dealers will remove a bolt on the left-rear side member attaching the bracket to the fuel filler pipe. That will change the load path during a rear-impact crash, preventing filler pipe rupture.

2016 Honda Civic models
On certain vehicles equipped with 2.0L engines, a piston pin circlip may not have been installed or may have been improperly installed into the piston during assembly. Over the course of engine operation, the piston pin will rub against the cylinder wall, causing noise and damage, or in the worst case, the piston pin may detach from one side of the piston and cause an engine failure and possibly an under-hood fire.
Models 10,698 vehicles.
What to Do Have the dealer inspect and repair, as necessary.

2016-2017 Hyundai Santa Fe Sport models
On certain vehicles, the wiring to the switch within the driver seat belt buckle—which monitors whether or not the seat belt is buckled—could become damaged by the seat's height adjuster mechanism. That could result in either no audible signal (chime) or indicator light if the buckle is not fastened, or the chime and indicator light could stay on when the seat belt is buckled.
Models 9,552 vehicles.
What to Do Have the dealer inspect and, if necessary, reroute the harness to its proper location. Any harnesses with damage to the circuitry will be replaced.

Autos

All of the tested vehicles are available in Canada. Listed within category. **Report and Ratings, pages 62-64**

MAKE & MODEL	PRICE RANGE	ACCELERATION (SEC.)				FUEL ECONOMY (LITERS PER 100 KM)		
		0-50 KM/H	0-100 KM/H	80-100 KM/H	500 METERS	CITY DRIVING	HIGHWAY DRIVING	OVERALL
MIDSIZED SEDAN								
Kia Optima	$23,495–$37,595	3.4	8.4	3.3	18.7	12.9	5.9	8.5
COMPACT PICKUP TRUCK								
Toyota Tacoma	$28,345–$44,625	3.7	8.6	3.7	18.8	16.9	9.6	12.3

Contact Info

How to reach manufacturers in Canada.

Apple
800-263-3394
apple.ca

Blomberg
800-459-9848
blombergappliances.com

Bosch
866-442-6986
boschappliances.com

GE
800-626-2000
ge.com/ca

Google
google.ca

Kenmore
800-267-3277
sears.ca

KitchenAid
800-807-6777
kitchenaid.ca

Maytag
800-688-2002
maytag.ca

Miele
800-643-5381
miele.ca

Roku
roku.ca

Thermador
800-735-4328
thermador.com

Viking
888-845-4641
vikingrange.com

Whirlpool
800-807-6777
whirlpoolappliances.ca

IF THAT DOESN'T WORK
Try prescription-strength ibuprofen or naproxen. If you have pain only in one or two joints, you could try a topical prescription NSAID, such as diclofenac gel (Voltaren), drops (Pennsaid), or patches (Flector). Topical treatments are also a good alternative if regular NSAID pills make your stomach upset or if you're at risk for ulcers, gastrointestinal bleeding, a heart attack, or a stroke.

GET TO AN EMERGENCY ROOM
Seek help if a joint becomes extremely painful, swollen, red, and warm to the touch, especially if symptoms develop quickly over a few hours or days. The joint could be infected.

NEVER DO THIS
Don't rely on supplements, such as glucosamine or chondroitin. Numerous studies show they're no better than a placebo and can interact with other medication, for example, by intensifying the effects of blood thinners, which can cause dangerous bleeding. Also, don't remain sedentary for more than a day or so. When you experience pain and inflammation, modify your activities to stay as active as possible without making your symptoms worse.

PREVENT IT IN THE FIRST PLACE
Stay active and maintain a healthy weight. Losing just 5 percent of your body weight reduces your risk of developing osteoarthritis in the knees.

WHEN PAIN IS REALLY BAD
You could consider steroid shots or possibly injections of hyaluronic acid, though both provide only modest relief. If after several tries there's no improvement, surgery may be the next step. Knee replacements and other surgery can change the quality of your life and help you be more active, but there's a risk of complications, such as infection. And recovery can take months. To increase your odds of the best outcome, look for a surgeon who does at least 50 to 100 surgeries per year, and ask about his or her complication and infection rates.

TENSION HEADACHE

It's a garden-variety headache: a dull pain across the forehead, temples, or around the back of your head. Up to 80 percent of people suffer from an occasional tension headache.

WHAT CAUSES IT
Anxiety, eye strain, fatigue, and stress trigger tension headaches by causing muscles to tighten in the neck and scalp. New research also suggests a link between tension headaches and changes in certain brain chemicals, similar to what happens with a migraine.

TREAT IT FIRST WITH
Try water, if you're dehydrated. A 2004 study found that people who drank one-half to three-quarters of a liter of water lessened their headache pain. If after an hour or so you're still suffering, you can turn to an over-the-counter pain reliever like acetaminophen (Tylenol and generic), ibuprofen (Advil and generic), or naproxen (Aleve and generic). Taking a hot or cold shower and resting in a quiet room with a cool cloth on your forehead may also help.

IF THAT DOESN'T WORK
Check with your doctor to determine whether you have migraines or there's another cause. Jaw clenching and teeth grinding in your sleep, for example, can trigger tension headaches. If you suspect your bite is to blame, see your dentist.

GET TO AN EMERGENCY ROOM
If you have a headache that comes on suddenly, is severe, and persists, or you have speech, vision, or movement problems or a loss of balance, you should act. If you have a headache after a head injury, it could be a sign of a concussion.

NEVER DO THIS
Don't take OTC pain relievers more than a few times per week because that could cause more headaches. (The same is true if you have migraines.) Also avoid CT scans. A severe headache may make you think you have a brain tumor, but that's rarely true. Doctors can usually diagnose your pain based on your symptoms and a physical exam. If the exam results are abnormal or your doctor still can't identify the cause of your pain, an imaging test can make sense. In most cases, an MRI is better than a CT scan, which can expose you to unnecessary radiation. That advice is supported by the American College of Radiology.

PREVENT IT IN THE FIRST PLACE
Watch your alcohol intake because chemicals like sulfites and flavonoids can trigger headaches (and migraines). Control stress with meditation or other relaxation techniques. Getting enough sleep can also prevent headaches; so can staying hydrated.

Good posture can relieve neck stress and help avoid headaches, too. A 2015 Danish study found that people who suffered from tension headaches also had decreased muscle strength in the neck's extensor muscles. That can cause the flexor muscles to overcompensate and pull the head forward, triggering a headache.

If you have headaches more than 15 times per month, your doctor may suggest a daily antidepressant such as amitriptyline (generic only), which has been found to help prevent chronic headaches but can also cause side effects such as drowsiness, weight gain, dry mouth, constipation, or blurred vision.

MIGRAINE

These headaches can cause you to become hypersensitive to sound and light, and can last from a few hours to three days. They can also be accompanied by nausea and blurred vision or flashing lights known as auras. Women are up to three times more likely than men to suffer from these high-powered headaches.

WHAT CAUSES IT
An oversensitive trigeminal nerve—the cranial nerve responsible for facial sensation and jaw movement—may be partly to blame. Experts think that migraine sufferers may be genetically predisposed to the condition. Migraines can be set off by certain foods, strong perfumes, flickering lights, hormones, or weather changes. They may cause a chemical release that swells blood vessels and sends out pain signals.

TREAT IT FIRST WITH
If the migraine is mild, try an over-the-counter pain reliever, such as ibuprofen, naproxen, or a combination of acetaminophen, aspirin, and caffeine. (Excedrin Migraine and multiple generics have all three.) Those remedies block the release of prostaglandins, which send pain signals to the brain. Take the meds promptly: Studies suggest that digestion may slow down during a migraine, making it difficult to metabolize drugs. A hot or cold compress on your head or face could also help to relieve the pain. And if you haven't taken medicine that includes caffeine, try an 8-ounce cup of coffee, which should help to constrict blood vessels. There's one surprising way to relieve migraine pain: having sex. A 2013 German study in the journal Cephalalgia found that among 800 migraine sufferers, two-thirds who had sex during their migraine reported that headache pain was lessened afterward.

IF THAT DOESN'T WORK
See your doctor ASAP to get a prescription med called a triptan. Consumer Reports Best Buy Drugs recommends sumatriptan (Imitrex and generic) as a good option. These drugs constrict blood vessels in the brain. They can ratchet down pain within 2 hours and help relieve nausea.

GET TO AN EMERGENCY ROOM
If pain is severe or you have nausea or you're vomiting, you may need an injection of a triptan, which can work right away, or an IV of a different drug, such as ketorolac (Toradol). You may also need an antiemetic to help stop vomiting.

NEVER DO THIS
Don't take more pain reliever than the amount prescribed or indicated on the label. Doing so can also lead to rebound headaches. And don't take opioids, such as hydrocodone (Vicodin) or oxycodone (OxyContin, Percocet) to treat a migraine. They're rarely effective for migraine pain.

PREVENT IT IN THE FIRST PLACE
Figure out your triggers and avoid them. Alcohol, stress, dehydration, and aspartame (found in chewing gum and diet soda) can be problems. For some, not getting their usual amount of caffeine can also trigger a migraine. Stress is often the culprit for those who suffer from chronic migraines (occurring on more than 15 days per month). To reduce your stress, try biofeedback or cognitive behavioral therapy. Acupuncture could also help.

Chronic migraine sufferers should also consider a daily dose of certain high blood pressure drugs shown to reduce migraine frequency, including propranolol (Inderal and generic) and timolol. The antiseizure drugs topiramate (Topamax and generic) and valproic acid (Depakote and generic), and certain antidepressants such as amitriptyline (generic only) can also help.

NECK AND SHOULDER

It's a dull ache to a sharper pain, often accompanied by stiffness and tightness. It may hurt to turn your head or raise your arm. Neck pain is a top reason for doctor visits and is reported by women more often than men.

WHAT CAUSES IT
Pain in the neck and shoulder is often a response to overexertion, poor posture, stress, an injury, or sleeping in the wrong position. It can also arise from an injury where the neck experiences a rapid, forceful back-and-forth movement (whiplash), or from arthritis. Shoulder pain without neck pain tends to stem from an injury, for example, from strains or tendinitis.

TREAT IT FIRST WITH
Believe it or not, exercises that strengthen and stretch the muscles of your neck have been shown in studies to work better than medication. Apply heat for 10 to 15 minutes periodically for the first day or so after an injury. Support your neck while you sleep by lying on your back with one or more pillows beneath your knees and a small pillow under your head; doing so keeps your neck and head in a neutral position. If you need further relief, our Best Buy Drugs analysis suggests trying over-the-counter painkillers such as ibuprofen (Advil and generic) or naproxen (Aleve and generic).

IF THAT DOESN'T WORK
Physical therapy with exercise can help with persistent pain; studies show relief can happen in as few as one to three sessions. Work with a physical therapist on your posture—for example, how to improve the position of your head and neck when you talk on the phone or work on a computer. Working with a cognitive-behavioral therapist can teach you relaxation and stress-reduction techniques to lower stress-induced pain.

GET TO AN EMERGENCY ROOM
If your pain stems from a recent fall or car crash, that could signal a serious problem, such as a dislocated shoulder. Pain that comes suddenly, running to your jaw, one or both arms, or neck, along with shortness of breath, dizziness, or sweating could be signs of a heart attack.

NEVER DO THIS
Avoid cervical traction, in which a physical therapist pulls your neck. Research hasn't shown it to be helpful. Also skip injections; repeated steroid shots can weaken neck muscles, and Botox injections don't work better than placebo injections. Surgery usually won't help if the pain is only in your neck or is caused by arthritis.

PREVENT IT IN THE FIRST PLACE
Regular stretching can help prevent muscle spasms that trigger neck pain. Or try acupuncture. A November 2015 study in the Annals of Internal Medicine found that it substantially eased neck pain for people with chronic symptoms. In our 2011 survey of alternative therapies, 44 percent of people with neck pain said acupuncture "helped a lot." Consider trying a new pillow based on how you like to sleep. Side or back sleepers need small pillows that keep the neck in a neutral position. Avoid sleeping on your stomach. For back sleepers, avoid pillows that pitch your neck too far forward.

UP IN SMOKE?

As medical marijuana gets a legal foothold in more and more states, the jury is still out on whether it works

PHOTO: DAN FORBES/TRUNK ARCHIVE

HAVING WORKED AS A DATA ANALYST, Darren Forsythe is a self-professed "data guy." He has also suffered for years from debilitating pain and muscle spasms caused by multiple sclerosis. He's been on and off a long roster of prescription drugs that have helped relieve his symptoms only to leave him in a despondent fog. After a drug interaction sent him to an emergency room, he decided to replace his meds with medical marijuana. It's legal in Colorado, where he lives.

But because it's still illegal at the federal level, doctors can't formally prescribe medical marijuana. Nor can they say which varieties might work for which patients, at what amount, or even how it should be used (smoked, eaten, inhaled as vapor, or in a spray or topical cream).

To figure out what might work for him, Forsythe drew on his analytical skills and did an experiment in which he was the lead investigator and the sole research subject, testing various marijuana-based products. "We've used a spreadsheet to keep track of which strains work against which symptoms," his wife, Joy, says.

The couple discovered that one strain, Orange Kush, works well during acute sclerotic attacks; another, Gumbi, can

banish a specific kind of pain. Forsythe now uses multiple marijuana-based products, taking care to rotate them. Otherwise, he says, he's learned that "tolerance builds and efficacy wanes."

Good Drug, Bad Drug

Marijuana has an unusual medicinal history. For almost a century, the plant was a legal elixir thought to work against a range of maladies—until changing social mores and bad publicity helped spur its gradual criminalization.

In 1942 the drug was removed from the U.S. Dispensatory, a federal list of approved medications. Congress classified it as a Schedule I substance in 1970—a category that includes heroin—meaning that it had no medical value and a high potential for abuse. And research on the drug would have to be tightly controlled.

Today, marijuana remains a Schedule I drug, but there are signs of change: Federal agencies are considering reclassifying it so that it can be prescribed.

But at the state level, the plant's status has already evolved. Laws implementing medical-marijuana programs have been passed in 23 states plus the District of Columbia, and for recreational use in four states and D.C., with initiatives pending in several more.

The impetus for that shift depends on whom you ask. Proponents cite mounting evidence of marijuana's therapeutic value; critics point to public relations campaigns funded by wealthy marijuana entrepreneurs. The two sides are sharply divided over how to regulate the drug. But on this much everyone agrees: Our complicated relationship with marijuana has entered a new and confusing moment.

The discord between state and federal policies has created a morass for patients and doctors. Medical-marijuana products sold to consumers at dispensaries aren't approved by the Food and Drug Administration. And without federal guidance or oversight, individual states have struggled to establish the kind of quality-assurance protocols that exist for FDA-approved drugs. Also, research into marijuana's therapeutic value has been hampered. And doctors have been reluctant to step into the fray.

Those shortcomings have forced consumers like Forsythe to take their chances on a product that can be mislabeled or contaminated with pesticides. And it can come with other serious downsides, including panic attacks, cardiac problems, and accidents related to being under the influence. Marijuana use sent about 376,000 people to emergency rooms in 2009, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse. It's also addictive for as many as 9 percent of adults and 16 percent of adolescents who use it frequently. And there's strong evidence that it can trigger early-onset schizophrenia in frequent users who are genetically predisposed.

A Problematic Plant

Marijuana differs from traditional pharmaceuticals in ways that make it difficult for scientists to study. The plant has more than 400 distinct chemical compounds, including about 70 different cannabinoids (chemicals that help produce the "high"), compared with just one or two active ingredients for most FDA-approved drugs. Not only do those cannabinoids have their own individual effects, but they also interact with each other in an untold number of ways. Different ratios of the same compounds can produce significantly different results. And studies of the individual compounds tell us almost nothing about whole-plant medicine.

But to study the whole plant, scientists have had to clear a bureaucratic thicket far denser than for other prospective medications. Not only must the FDA approve the proposed research plan, but the Drug Enforcement Administration also needs to issue a Schedule I license and the National Institute on Drug Abuse has to agree to supply the actual plant materials.

"Any one of these agencies can stop a research project in its tracks," says J. Michael Bostwick, a psychiatrist at the Mayo Clinic who has studied the history of marijuana's use. As a result, he says, high-quality research has been at a near standstill for almost half a century.

DANGEROUS IMPOSTERS

Maybe you've seen "marijuana" products sold at deli or convenience store counters labeled as "potpourri" or "herbal incense." The name suggests a drug that offers the same high as marijuana. These products, known as "synthetic marijuana," are chemical compounds sprayed onto dried plants, then smoked.

Although these chemical compounds share a moniker with the well-known botanical, they're not the same thing. The "highs" they produce can be wildly unpredictable, and they've been associated with thousands of emergency-room visits each year, plus an alarming uptick in calls to poison-control centers. They can cause vomiting, seizures, kidney damage, and violent and suicidal behavior, and they're suspected of causing a number of deaths in the past several years.

One problem is that compounds can be sprayed unevenly over the plant material, creating deadly "hot spots" where too much chemical is smoked at once. Another problem is that manufacturers change the chemical compositions frequently to evade legal prosecution. In 2015 a bill was reintroduced in the Senate that would enable prosecutors to pursue synthetic-marijuana dealers based on marketing and product-label claims. In the meantime, the best hope of curbing use is to spread this message around: Synthetic marijuana has no medical value; it won't get you high in the same way as regular marijuana. In fact, it could kill you.

That's not to say that research hasn't been done. In fact, there are thousands of studies and reviews on marijuana's medical efficacy. But according to a recent editorial in The Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA), studies to support its use for state-approved conditions are of mostly poor quality; they fail to meet FDA standards. The authors noted that the few credible studies suggest that marijuana can treat pain syndromes, the pain and muscle spasticity from multiple sclerosis, and the nausea caused by chemotherapy drugs. But almost every state that has legalized medical marijuana has cleared it for a longer list of conditions. For example, five states have approved it for the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder even though the evidence supporting it is weak or nonexistent.

Flying Blind

Prescription drugs are regulated by the FDA to ensure that they're safe, effective, consistently produced, and accurately labeled. There aren't always such guarantees with medical marijuana. At least four states don't require testing for potency or for contaminants like metals, pesticides, or microbials. Other states that have legalized it have a wide range of policies.

In a study published in 2015 in JAMA, researchers tested edible cannabis from three major metropolitan areas. They found that most product labels were inaccurate. More than half of the products had significantly less of the cannabinoid tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) than was stated on the label; others had significantly more. It's an issue that experts say extends to all forms of medical marijuana.

A Maze of Regulations

Because marijuana is still currently classified as a Schedule I drug, a patient can't get an actual prescription for it. Doctors only certify that a patient suffers from a condition for which the drug is approved. Patients then must register with their state to obtain a marijuana-patient ID card. Then they can buy the drug from a dispensary or, in some states, grow their own.

But the protocol can vary widely from one state to another. For a recent study in the journal Health Affairs, Columbia University researchers evaluated state-run marijuana programs. They looked at basic medical criteria, such as whether physicians were required to complete a full medical exam before certifying prospective patients, or whether the program made use of prescription-drug monitoring systems and 30-day refill limits like those used for other controlled substances. They found that out of 24 programs, only those in nine states and the District of Columbia met enough of the standards to qualify as "medical."

The lack of standards has made some doctors reluctant to even certify prospective marijuana patients. "My malpractice insurance only covers me for the use of FDA-approved medications and treatments," Alan Berkenwald, M.D., an internist at Cooley Dickinson Hospital in Northampton, Mass., wrote in a recent editorial for The Daily Hampshire Gazette.

In 2002 the U.S. Court of Appeals ruled that doctors who merely recommended marijuana to their patients were protected by the right to free speech under the First Amendment. The attorney general took the additional step of announcing in 2009 that as long as state laws were followed, the federal government wouldn't penalize doctors or patients for participating in medical-marijuana programs. But those assurances haven't relieved the concerns of every doctor.

In 1972 and again in 2002, the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws unsuccessfully petitioned the federal government to remove marijuana from the list of Schedule I substances. The American Medical Association has suggested that the drug be re-evaluated and possibly reclassified. Although the federal government is considering rescheduling marijuana, it has yet to issue a decision. In the meantime, individual states will continue to chart their own course.

HOOKED ON HEALING

Many painkillers can be highly addictive. Learn how to protect yourself.

Our brains are hardwired to seek pleasure and avoid danger. It's what helps the human species survive. Biting into something luscious, enjoying a passionate kiss, or delighting in a baby's laugh lights up the brain's pleasure centers. Negative experiences set off fear and alarm.

Addictive drugs can "hijack the brain's reward system," says Andrew Kolodny, M.D., a senior scientist at Brandeis University and chief medical officer at Phoenix House, a national nonprofit center for addiction treatment. "They can overstimulate the brain's reward centers and also inhibit the part of the brain that reacts to potential harm."

Repeated use may damage the brain's frontal cortex, where decision-making takes place—paradoxically, the part of the brain that usually helps people recognize harmful behavior. Over time, people start to feel joyless, anxious, and depressed. Eventually they "are no longer using to feel good but to avoid feeling horrible," Kolodny says.

It's possible to become addicted to drugs like heroin or nicotine even if you don't have a genetic predisposition or history of anxiety, depression, or other mental illness.

As many as one out of four people taking a prescribed opioid such as OxyContin, Percocet, or Vicodin for several months or longer struggles with addiction, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

To minimize the risk of addiction, opioids should be a last resort, according to the CDC. If you must take prescription painkillers, start with the lowest effective dose and stay in close contact with your doctor.

Problems with overuse aren't limited to opioids. Almost one out of five marijuana users has a substance-abuse disorder, indicating that the drug is causing health problems or interfering with daily life, according to a 2014 government survey.

RENOVATION WITHOUT AGGRAVATION

Our survey of 300 contractors revealed shady pro practices, common and costly homeowner mistakes, and strategies to make your next project a complete success.

BY DANIEL DICLERICO

THINK 2016 might finally be the year to tackle that big renovation project you've been putting off? Welcome to the club. Fueled largely by the rebounding housing market, home improvement spending is projected to reach $155 billion this year, surpassing the peak set in 2006, according to Harvard's Joint Center for Housing Studies. At the same time, the construction industry is in the throes of a massive labor shortage, having shed more than 2 million jobs since 2007.

You don't need a degree in Keynesian economics to spot the problem: Demand for remodeling work is swiftly outpacing the supply of qualified professionals. "It's gotten to the point that I've had to tell clients that it might be a few months before I can take them on," says LuAnn Fabian, a general contractor (GC) based in Hermosa Beach, Calif. So if you want to be in your dream kitchen by the holidays, you could be clutching your tile samples a lot longer than anticipated.

Though the number of remodeling pros has declined, there are still less experienced–and less scrupulous–ones out there, according to a recent survey of 300 general contractors from around the country conducted by the Consumer Reports National Research Center. Among the shady industry practices GCs reported are contractors using unskilled laborers to carry out their work, and winning jobs with lowball bids and then jacking up the cost later with "unforeseen problems."

Our survey asked the crucial questions you might not know to ask, such as: How much wiggle room is there in the estimate? (Hint: more than you may think.) What are the biggest homeowner mistakes? How long do projects really take?

The answers, along with insights from other design and remodeling professionals, inform this, our home remodeler's survival guide. Follow our advice and you

PHOTO ILLUSTRATIONS BY ZELA LOBB

could save thousands of dollars on your renovation without compromising quality–or losing your cool.

THE PLANNING PHASE

Proper planning is the best predictor of satisfaction and will also minimize the number of costly changes you make once the work is underway. So before you even think of looking for a contractor, you'll need to spend time gathering ideas and taking a hard look at your own budget. A 2015 report from Houzz, a home-design website, found that half of homeowners who renovated their kitchen gathered ideas for six months or longer. You can organize inspirational photos by using Houzz's ideabook feature or starting a Pinterest page; an old-fashioned scrapbook with pictures from your favorite magazines will also work.

As excited as you might be to get started, avoid the temptation to rush: Chances are you'll be living with the results of the project for a long time, so you'll want to get it right. Consider factoring major life changes into your plan, which could include an accessible walk-in shower or an open-plan family room big enough to accommodate your future teenage kids and their friends.

Remember to consider the impact on the resale value of your home, too, even if you have no plans to move. For example, you might not have any use for the second bathroom with a full tub, but you'll probably regret converting it into a home office or workout room if you ever do decide to sell, because additional bathrooms are always a big selling point.

Once you have a clear idea of what you'd like to do and how much you can realistically spend, it's time to bring in the pros. For major projects–say, a gut kitchen renovation or family room addition–you should gather your entire team as early as possible. See "Assembling Your A-Team," on page 45, for details. "Its always best to have the architect and the general contractor working together right from the start," says Dawn Zuber, an architect based in Canton, Mich.

If you're not knocking down walls or making other structural changes, an interior designer or a certified kitchen and bath designer can probably draw up the plans; most charge fees between 4 and 7 percent of the total budget–vs. the 10 to 20 percent most architects charge.

WHETHER YOU opt for an architect or a designer, insist on 3D drawings: They'll help you visualize the remodeled space better than flat elevations will. Cutting-edge design pros are beginning to use virtual reality software to create "immersive" spaces that clients can experience by wearing a special headset. The technology isn't widely available but could soon significantly reduce remodeler's remorse.

LEARN

For a list of remodeling projects that add maximum value to the home, go to **ConsumerReports.org/homevalues**

Establish a system of checks and balances between your design team and your contractor from the start. "It's those big decisions made in the first 10 to 15 percent of the design process that have the most impact on cost," says Marc Truant, president of a Boston-based design-build firm–the term for remodeling businesses that provide both the design and construction work. "An experienced GC will help you head off things you can't afford before you pay for finished drawings."

Though word-of-mouth referrals from friends and neighbors are the best way to find remodeling pros, real estate agents can also provide leads to reputable GCs. The National Association of the Remodeling Industry offers a state-by-state directory of certified contractors on its website, nari.org (its members must go through extensive screening and testing and adhere to a strict code of ethics),

and online home services, such as Angie's List, HomeAdvisor, and Porch, can also help you find pros. See "Word-of-Mouth Moves to the Web," on page 44, for details. Remember these rules as you go through the vetting process:

Check credentials. Even if they come with a glowing review from your sister-in-law, you still need to check the bona fides of every professional on your short list. In our survey, almost a fifth of GCs lacked either a state license or the proper insurance, and 9 percent lacked both. Though proper credentials aren't a guarantee of quality, they're a good sign that the GC runs a reputable business. What's more, our survey found that fully accredited GCs are better at holding down costs when unexpected problems arise. The Contractor's License Reference Site (at contractors-license.org) has information on licensing requirements in your state and a list of licensed contractors.

Listen to your gut. Trust and a good rapport between you and your contractor are essential. Any negative feelings you have during the initial interview (Too bossy? Condescending? Rushed?) will only intensify as the project heats up. It's also important to understand how a GC communicates during a project and to be comfortable with that method. Ask whether you'll be dealing with him directly, or whether he'll be delegating the job to one of his project managers (if the latter, make sure to vet the manager, too). Beyond face time, some GCs rely on email or handwritten notes, and others use construction management software, which lets a homeowner track scheduling, payments, shipments, and more.

Remember that budgets are a moving target. The number you start out with during the planning phase is likely to change when you begin to see what materials actually cost. GCs have to make similar calculations, factoring what they think the job will cost against their own profit margins and unforeseen expenses (more on those in a moment).

Always negotiate. Only 4 percent of the GCs in our survey said they are never willing to negotiate the price of a job (66 percent are somewhat willing, and 30 percent are very willing). Getting bids from at least three GCs will give you a sense of the market rate and also provide bargaining power. "Remember, the lowest bid may not be the best," says Katherine Hutt, national spokeswoman for the Better Business Bureau. Conventional wisdom holds that you should throw out the highest bid, but if you think that the GC offering it is the best person for the job, it's worth trying to negotiate a lower price.

Keeping the business of a repeat customer was the biggest reason to haggle, cited by 75 percent of GCs, who reported offering a median discount of 10 percent. So if there's more work coming down the line, be sure to mention that during negotiations. Combining projects could also save you in the long run: Two-thirds of GCs said they offer discounts on jobs involving more than one room (10 percent was the median discount offered on multiroom projects in our survey).

Be prepared for surprises. When we asked GCs about job-related (as opposed to people-related) problems that lead to delays or cost overruns, they said that many of the culprits are hidden behind walls—structural damage, for example, or electrical wiring that isn't up to code. Even though most contractors plan for those contingencies, we recommend adding at least a 10 percent cushion into your budget to cover such surprises.

On major projects, it's worth paying a few hundred dollars for a pre-inspection by a certified home inspector. "Even a good GC might only look as far as the kitchen or bathroom; we see the house as a system," says Frank Lesh, executive director of the American Society of Home Inspectors. "Let's say you're putting in an

(continued on page 45)

SHOW ME THE MONEY!

The pros and cons of taking a loan from your contractor

If you need help paying for your renovation, your contractor might save you a trip to the bank: Forty-two percent of GCs in our survey said they provide financing options to clients.

Some GCs offer interest-free loans for, say, 12 to 18 months—almost always through a third-party lender. Others may offer so-called private label credit cards, such as the Wells Fargo Home Projects Visa, that can be used to pay for renovations (interest rates range from 0 to 12.9 percent). You can use the card at retailers, but interest rates go up to 28.9 percent.

Contractors may also act as middlemen for loans with third parties. Interest rates at LendKey, for example, recently ranged from 6.49 to 11.99 percent, depending on your credit.

Those options are not without drawbacks: If you can't pay off an interest-free loan in full before the term is up, for example, you'll probably owe interest backdated to the day you signed the deal. With personal loans, you need to check all terms and conditions to make sure there are no unexpected fees. Make sure you don't lose the right to withhold payments, if that was stipulated in your contract.

Disciplined borrowers might consider using a card with a zero percent introductory rate to pay for a renovation. But that approach is only for those who are sure they can pay off the balance before the introductory period ends.

Compare any deal you're offered through a contractor with banks and credit union options, including home equity lines of credit or home equity loans (currently averaging around 4.7 and 4.5 percent, respectively, for $30,000). Compare the full cost of the loans, including rates, closing costs, origination fees, and any other charges, says Bill Simone, president of Custom Design & Construction, based in Los Angeles, and a member of the steering committee for Harvard's Joint Center for Housing Studies. And keep in mind that when your lender is your contractor, you need to vet him in both roles. Ask past clients whether there were problems using his financing, and check to see whether there are complaints about the company's financing deals with your state's office of consumer affairs and the Better Business Bureau.

—Mandy Walker

WORD-OF-MOUTH MOVES TO THE WEB

Online home-services directories can provide hundreds—or even thousands—of user ratings for contractors, plumbers, and other pros. Here's a look at five popular sites with our take on what they're good at and what they're not to guide you in your home improvement research.

Angieslist.com

GOOD FOR User review reliability.
NUMBER OF PROS 1.2 million.
COVERAGE National.
COST Currently about $10 per year; reviews and ratings will be free starting this summer.
UNIQUE FEATURES Has a proprietary process for verifying that reviews are authentic, including an annual audit by an outside company to prevent service providers from reviewing themselves favorably or their competitors unfavorably.
WHAT WE LIKE Ten million verified reviews. Our test search for kitchen remodelers in a Chicago-area ZIP code turned up companies with hundreds and thousands of reviews; user review sample sizes of that magnitude lend credibility to the resulting letter grades.
CAVEATS Contractors who advertise on Angie's List show up first in search results when the default search option "with coupons" is used. Using the "Recent grade: A-F" search option is a way around that.

Checkbook.org

GOOD FOR Price guidance and independent ratings not influenced by advertising.
NUMBER OF PROS 45,000.
COVERAGE Boston; Chicago; Minneapolis/St. Paul; Philadelphia; San Francisco/Oakland/San Jose; Seattle/Tacoma; and Washington, D.C., areas.
COST $34 for two years.
UNIQUE FEATURES Completely funded by its members and accepting no advertising, Checkbook surveys its own subscribers as well as those at Consumer Reports (which provided early funding in the 1970s) about their experience with local contractors. Home improvement pros can't promote themselves by buying ads or evade scrutiny by opting out.
WHAT WE LIKE Instead of using letter or star grades, Checkbook shows the percentage of users who rated the pro as "superior" or "recommended." Provides price info based on apples-to-apples comparison by secret shoppers.
CAVEATS Available in only seven metro areas.

Homeadvisor.com

GOOD FOR Cost guidance and prescreening of pros.
NUMBER OF PROS 116,000.
COVERAGE National.
COST Free.
UNIQUE FEATURES HomeAdvisor matches you with up to four highly rated pros who are actually available to do the job. It also uses third-party sources to perform background checks of every service provider it accepts.
WHAT WE LIKE The "True cost guide" provides detailed cost estimates for hundreds of projects and jobs. Service providers cannot buy their way to the top of search results; all pay a $250 to $300 membership fee.
CAVEATS Checks for criminal convictions go back only three years; its search of civil judgments goes back only one year. The company also has limited ability to search criminal records in 22 states (including Georgia, Massachusetts, Michigan, and Virginia), and it does not check for complaints filed at state attorney general or consumer affairs agencies.

Houzz.com

GOOD FOR Design ideas and inspiration.
NUMBER OF PROS 1 million-plus.
COVERAGE National (U.S. and Canada).
COST Free.
UNIQUE FEATURES A huge archive of idea-inspiring photos of home interiors, exteriors, and design materials. Lets you search for the design pros and other contractors to do the work and to shop for the materials, appliances, and fixtures needed.
WHAT WE LIKE You can search photos by room, style, budget, or other criteria. Add the pictures you like to your ideabook or share them with friends or your contractor. Click to contact the design pro whose work you admire.
CAVEATS Professionals who pay to advertise can buy a prominent spot in search results. In fact, "sponsored" listings with no Houzz user reviews or star rating can rank higher than top-rated professionals who didn't advertise. Paid results are marked "sponsored," but in light gray type that's easy to miss.

Porch.com

GOOD FOR Finding contractors rated by the Better Business Bureau.
NUMBER OF PROS 3.5 million.
COVERAGE National.
COST Free.
UNIQUE FEATURES Offers descriptions and photos of roughly 138 million home projects, which consumers can use to gauge what their budget will buy and browse lower-cost alternatives, such as a cabinet facelift instead of a full kitchen remodel. The Ask Porch app provides free do-it-yourself advice from pros.
WHAT WE LIKE Easy access to BBB ratings and convenient links to contractors' websites.
CAVEATS "Guaranteed professionals" rise to the top of search results, but that badge is available only to service providers who pay $100 or more per month (varies by ZIP code). Guaranteed pros must pass a "comprehensive background check," but CEO and chairman Matt Ehrlichman told us that it's based on user reviews, licenses, project history, and "anything we can find on the Internet."

—Jeff Blyskal

extra bathroom. We'll come in with sewer scopes to make sure the plumbing system can handle the extra stress."

Larger contracting companies might offer a pre-inspection as part of their overall service. "We have a building performance engineer on our team who specializes in exploratory work," says John Kraemer, a GC based in Edina, Minn. "Using an infrared camera, he might find missing floor joists or walls that don't have any insulation." You'll still have to deal with the problems, but not in the last-minute manner that can quickly blow the budget.

Get everything in writing. No matter how much faith you have in your GC, a written contract is an essential protection for both of you. It should specify the full scope of the work, including a detailed breakdown of labor and material costs for each part of the project. For example, the electrical costs shouldn't be a single dollar amount. The contract should list the number of outlets, switches, and light fixtures, including all model numbers. It should also state a start and completion date (ask for a penalty fee of, say, $50 to $100 for every day past the deadline) and include a payment schedule, such as a 5 percent initial deposit with the remainder paid at defined milestones, for example, demolition, rough framing, and installation of finish materials.

BE SURE the contract also spells out "exclusions," or what's not included. Want to save money by handling the debris removal or finish painting on your own? That must be stipulated. For major projects, it's also worth including an arbitration clause. Should a major dispute arise between you and your GC that can't be settled in good faith, the clause provides language for resolution outside the court system, often with a state-appointed mediator. As for the fine print, watch out for "allowances," which give the contractor a lot of leeway in the prices of products and materials, and can end up busting the budget very quickly.

Cover your assets. Nine out of 10 GCs in our survey say they provide a written guarantee for their work, so insist on one in the contract. The median time period was 15½ months, with 14 percent of respondents promising more than three years of coverage. Even if your contract doesn't include a guarantee, you'll enjoy some protection if the contractor is licensed. For example, the California State License Board will rule on complaints involving patent defects (such as a cabinet that's coming off the wall) for up to four years and on latent structural defects (like a buckling foundation) for up to 10 years.

ASSEMBLING YOUR A-TEAM

Know what key players you need–and when you'll need them

Architect

What They Do
Listen to your ideas, help you think through the design, and translate all of it into drawings for the general contractor to follow.
When You Need One
You're knocking down walls or changing your home's structural or mechanical systems.
What They Charge
10 to 20 percent of overall project cost.

General Contractor

What They Do
These MVPs take charge of the project from start to finish, managing the schedule and hiring plumbers, electricians, and all other subcontractors. GCs also secure all necessary permits.
When You Need One
A job is too big to do on your own.
What They Charge
25 percent.

Interior or Kitchen/Bath Designer

What They Do
Help with design choices, such as selecting a kitchen countertop or the tile and tub for the bathroom. Budget permitting, it's worth considering a designer for the unique knowledge he or she brings. Find certified designers through the National Kitchen & Bath Association (nkba.org) or the American Society of Interior Designers (asid.org).
When You Need One
Trying to decide between granite, quartz, and laminate countertops is driving you insane.
What They Charge
4 to 7 percent.

Interior Decorator

What They Do
These tastemakers offer guidance on decorative style, color, furnishings, and other aesthetic concerns.
When You Need One
Never, really, but their advice can be the difference between a room that's so-so and one that's sensational.
What They Charge
5 to 20 percent.

Renovation Consultant

What They Do
Help you plan, determine your budget—they'll even be the liaison between you and the GC during the entire renovation.
When You Need One
You want a lot of hand-holding.
What They Charge
Up to 5 percent.

THE WORK PHASE

No matter how well you plan, remodeling is full of uncertainty. "I always tell my clients to bump up their estimates of time and money by 20 percent," says Bruce Irving, a renovation consultant based in

(continued on page 47)

IMPROVE YOUR ODDS OF SUCCESS

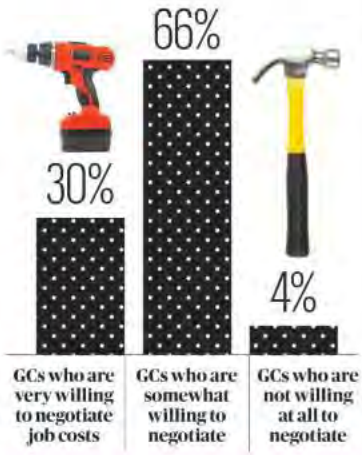
Keep your project from becoming a money pit with the following tips, based on our survey of 300 general contractors (GCs) nationwide

Always Pick a Pro

69% **GCs** who are licensed/ registered and insured

31% **GCs** who are not licensed/ registered and insured

Make a Deal



Shield Yourself from Shady Practices

Percentage of contractors who have seen other pros ...

Give a lowball bid, then later jack up the fee: 35%

Use unskilled or inexperienced subcontractors: 31%

Overcharge for materials: 24%

25%

Median profit margins that contractors build into their estimates

Prepare for the Unexpected

*Most common problems that lead to cost overruns**

Existing structural damage: 42%

Materials arrive broken or they're not what was ordered: 31%

Getting permits: 30%

Pet Peeves

Most common complaints contractors have about clients:

53%
Indecisiveness

29%
Unrealistic expectations about how long a job will take

28%
Micromanaging

*Percentages based on the proportion of GCs who indicated that they have experienced problems that led to cost overruns in the past 24 months

Cambridge, Mass. According to our survey, kitchen projects require a median of three weeks to complete, but a third of them take four weeks or longer.

The work is messy, too. If there's any way for you to move in with relatives or into a hotel, at least during the dusty demo phase, you'll minimize stress–along with possible exposure to hazardous materials. If your home was built before 1978, your GC will need to follow the Environmental Protection Agency's Lead Renovation, Repair and Painting Rule, which includes containing lead dust with plastic sheeting and disposing of contaminated debris in heavy-duty bags.

Store valuable or treasured items far from the work site or at a storage facility. If you have to stay in the house, a good contractor will help you find ways to keep disruptions to a minimum, by setting up a temporary food-prep space and relocating the refrigerator, for instance, during a kitchen renovation. These other tips will save you trouble once the work begins:

Stay involved. You can't just write the contractor a check–then check out. "Homeowner involvement throughout the project is critical," Truant says. Even if you've moved out of the house, plan on a couple of in-person meetings every week and more frequent meetings at crucial points, such as during the demolition phase or before tile is installed (changing the layout or grout color can be difficult and costly once work has started).

Stick to the plan. Changing your mind after the work is underway is the biggest mistake homeowners make, and it can be the costliest too, according to our survey. So-called change orders, or work that arises after the contract has been signed, inflate the budget by an average of 10 percent. It might be as simple as adding another couple of light fixtures in the hall, but that means the GC has to get the electrician back in, and probably the painter, too. The domino effect quickly adds up, and the homeowner foots the bill.

Make the GC your point person. Engaging the subcontractors directly often creates conflict. If you have a question about their work–or their behavior–tell the GC and let him or her handle it.

Though you shouldn't engage the subcontractors, you do need to be sure they're being paid. If they're not, you could be held liable. Stipulate in the contract that the GC will provide you with lien releases (basically proofs of payment) signed by the GC and subcontractor throughout the project.

Don't demolish your relationships along the way. Client-contractor relations aren't the only ones that get tested on a remodel. Couples often feel the strain as well. Consider a January 2016 survey from Houzz, which found that 41 percent of people who remodeled with their partner found the experience frustrating; 7 percent felt they needed couples counseling during the process, and 5 percent even considered a breakup.

"A home remodel is a blank canvas upon which any unresolved issues in your relationship will be painted," Irving says. He recommends that, whenever possible, couples should try their hand at a small project before tackling a potential relationship wrecker. "Have the bathroom retiled and see how that goes before you do a master suite addition," he suggests.

A TALE OF TWO CONTRACTS

Most renovations are covered by one of these two types of contracts. Choose wisely.

FIXED-PRICE CONTRACTS

With a fixed-price contract, the general contractor provides an estimate covering labor, materials, profit margin, and a cushion for contingencies. If the contractor exceeds the budget for a foreseeable reason—underestimating the cost of the drywall installation, for example—he or she is on the hook. That can be advantageous for the homeowner, but it can also affect the quality of the work if the contractor cuts corners to stay on budget—by ordering cheaper drywall, perhaps. Also, if the project comes in under budget, the contractor pockets the profit, which again could encourage subpar work.

COST-PLUS CONTRACTS

A cost-plus contract covers labor, materials, and profit but does not include an amount for contingencies. Instead, additional charges are passed along to the homeowner. That could put you at a disadvantage if you're embarking on a complicated project that might reveal expensive unknowns. If the project comes in under budget, however, you keep the savings. What's more, the contractor has no incentive to scrimp. "If you trust your contractor, cost-plus will almost always save you money and give you the best quality product," says Frank Montgomery, a contractor based in Franklin, N.C. Most cost-plus contracts come with a guaranteed maximum price, or a ceiling on additional charges. One downside: You'll need to stay on top of the paperwork unless you have unquestioning faith in your contractor.

THE POST-PROJECT PHASE

There's no such thing as perfection on a remodeling job. That said, don't make the final payment until you're 100 percent satisfied with the project. "Making sure the electrical plates are dead-square on the walls is worth being picky about," says Irving. "Otherwise they will haunt you."

Share your experience. Word-of-mouth still rules, but the power of online reviews on sites such as HomeAdvisor and Porch is getting stronger. Whether you had a great experience or a terrible one, you'll be providing a valuable service to other homeowners (and threatening to share a negative experience might also bring a wayward contractor back in line).

If you follow our guidelines, though, chances are your remodel will turn out just the way you wanted. Then it's time to start dreaming about your next project.

PHOTOS: ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

Just Married

Get MORE WEDDING *for Your* MONEY

Whether it's your first marriage or your third, whether you're the one tying the knot or just footing the bill, use our savvy guide to save money, skirt scams, and still wed in style.

BY TOBIE STANGER

PHOTOGRAPH BY THE VOORHES

Can You Spot the $10,000 Gown?

SIERRA FARINAS and Freddy Salgado have found clever ways to wed in style without overspending. They've planned a ceremony on Halloween with décor both spooky and sweet, and because the holiday falls on a Monday this year, the caterer was willing to offer them steep discounts. To save even more, a friend's sister will decorate the rented hall for a small fee, and two other friends will DJ at a discount. In that way, the couple had hoped to pull off a party for 80 to 90 guests and still come in under $10,000—well below the average spent in northern New Jersey, where they live.

But lately, as Sierra and her mother, Leslie, have begun filling in the details, there are signs that those early vows of frugality may be weakening.

At a glitzy showcase of wedding services in March, the mother of the bride made an impulse buy—reserving a 1959 Bentley for the couple to ride in at a cost of $500.

"I got inspired," Leslie explains, "and it was on sale."

Values and Perspective

The perfect wedding, circa 2016, can be a dazzling million-dollar blowout at a fancy hotel or a cozy backyard barbecue for a tiny fraction of the cost. It's all about values and perspective, taste, and yes, money.

But no matter what you expect to spend, it's hard even for bargain-hunters to resist all of the shiny extras. Lures are everywhere, from frothy four-figure gowns to aerial views of the day's festivities, shot by drones for hire.

The $60-billion-a-year wedding industry knows how to stoke expectations and drum up sales. So maybe it's no surprise that Americans now spend an average of $27,000 on a wedding, according to The Wedding Report, an industry publication that tracks costs.

That got us to wondering about whether there exists, in this Wedding-Industrial

(continued on page 52)

The average bride spends more than $1,200 on a wedding dress, according to The Wedding Report, a bridal industry publication. And ritzier options abound, featured prominently throughout glossy bridal websites and magazines.

The implied message to brides seems to be that the more they spend, the closer they'll get to wedding-day perfection.

The spring 2016 issue of The Knot magazine, for example, features a voluminous, $21,000 Galia Lahav gown within its "Real Weddings" section. (That's more than many real folks spend on the whole shebang.)

That got us to wondering, when a bride floats down the aisle in a cloud of satin and tulle, can guests really tell whether she paid a lot or a little?

Our Bridal Gown Price Challenge suggests not.

FOOLED BY FROUFROU

We set out to see whether price and elegance really are connected. In late February we rented or borrowed five gently used and new, recent-vintage wedding gowns, with estimated retail values of $500 to $10,000, according to the companies that supplied them.

We did our best to control for dresses of similar style so that personal preference wouldn't enter into the judgments. We then asked colleagues at our Yonkers, N.Y., headquarters—regular folks and generally not fashionistas—to match the gowns with their retail values. We let our amateur judges view the gowns and touch their fabric, but not look inside or otherwise handle the garments.

FASHION STYLING: MELISSA WARD SCHORSCH

PHOTOGRAPH BY JAMES WORRELL

Eighty-nine women and 54 men participated.

The only dress that most people properly identified by price was the least expensive: a bright white, polyester David's Bridal dress made in China. Fifty-eight percent matched it with its price: $500. Only 41 percent properly guessed that an all-silk, elaborately pieced, made-in-America Vera Wang design was the most costly, at $10,000. Gowns priced in the middle—the $1,100 Mary's Bridal, $3,200 Winnie Couture, and $6,500 Ines di Santo—stumped our amateur judges. More than half thought the $3,200 dress was $1,100 or less, and 85 percent thought the $1,100 gown—with the most embellishment—cost $3,200 or more. Women were right more often than men, but those who had shopped for a wedding dress were not necessarily better judges. Just two of 143 people got all five prices right.

BEHIND THE SEAMS

There was no question, the higher-priced dresses—both of silk—were better made. Our in-house textile expert Pat Slaven examined each gown and found that the less costly ones had fewer finished edges and skimpier layers of tulle. They also had little or no hand-finishing, didn't feel as luxurious to slip into, and did not feature small luxuries such as invisible zippers.

Nevertheless, our expert concluded that all five of the frocks in our test could hold up for a day and night of revelry.

BE CREATIVE

You can spend less and still look fabulous, and very few people will know what you paid. And if you do fall for a costly designer gown, consider buying or renting one used. Borrowing Magnolia, the online company from which we rented four gowns (based in Athens, Ga.), offers used dresses for sale or rent at a deep discount from their original prices. Recent brides can rent out their own dresses to others; by doing so, they reap an average $535, the company says.

Another online service we used, Nearly Newlywed (based in Brooklyn, N.Y.), sells discounted new and used designer gowns that can be cleaned and resold through the company after the wedding.

Other options Purchase used from a secondhand shop. Tradesy and eBay also sell used gowns. (See "31 Ways to Save," on page 54, for more.)

Most crucial Find a skilled seamstress for alterations.

ANSWERS: (1) David's Bridal, $500; (2) Vera Wang, $10,000; (3) Ines di Santo, $6,500; (4) Mary's Bridal, $1,100; (5) Winnie Couture, $3,200.

Complex, a secret, hidden surcharge when an event is a wedding and not, say, an anniversary party. So we assigned our secret shoppers to find out.

A Hidden Tax?

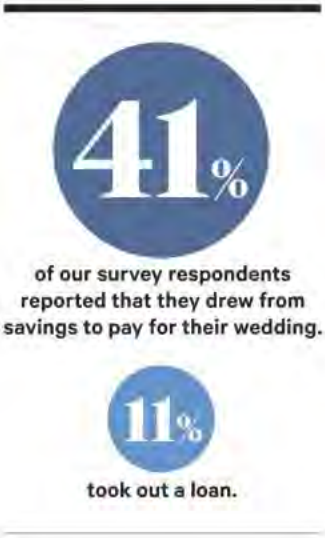
The results weren't as straightforward as we had imagined. Among the 25 vendors whose prices we shopped and could compare in five regions, we found a few–particularly limousine companies and photographers–that did charge more for a wedding than for another, similar event. When we did additional reporting, we saw a lot of caterers' wedding menus priced much higher than what they charged for banquets for, say, the annual Lions Club gathering.

But we also found a number of those same vendors willing to work with our shoppers to reduce costs. Some even volunteered money-saving solutions. Yet a survey conducted by the Consumer Reports National Research Center found that consumers usually don't exercise their bargaining clout. Some, the survey found, take on debt to pay for their big day.

As we discovered by talking to wedding industry experts, vendors, and couples themselves, it's still possible to plan a magical wedding even if your budget is modest. It just takes a certain willingness to ask sharp questions, keep talking, and bargain. And it really helps to consider creative, less traditional approaches and options–like scheduling on Halloween.

Lifting the Veil on Markups

Earlier this year Consumer Reports' secret shoppers went on a shopping spree to find out whether wedding couples are being overcharged. We focused on five metro areas–Atlanta; Colorado Springs, Colo.; southeastern Maine; Minneapolis; and Ventura, Calif.,–supplemented with research in several other cities. Pairs of shoppers called the same photographers, florists, caterers, and other party vendors at least a week apart and got comparative estimates for a wedding and a 50th anniversary party that were identical in every other respect. (We told photographers, for instance, that we needed their services only during the reception.) In more than a quarter of cases–28 percent–vendors quoted us prices that were higher for the wedding than for the anniversary party.



That kind of wedding surcharge played out more in some areas than in others.

- Some photographers inflated their pricing when the affair was a wedding. For instance, photography for a Saturday night wedding in mid-October cost $300 per hour at Angel Wings Photography in Atlanta. For a 50th anniversary party of the same size at the same time with an almost identical package of services, though, the charge was $150 per hour.
- Several limousine companies priced their bridal packages higher than other comparable services or posed restrictions on wedding clients. At DDG Classic Limousines in Colorado Springs, bridal couples reserving a Lincoln Town Car Stretch for 12 can make only round-trip reservations, at $120 per hour, including gratuity. The company won't permit wedding parties to reserve point-to-point trips. DDG says the policy protects both seller and buyer. "We and our customers have been burned before with the 'simple half-hour run' going over by an hour or more and costing everyone more or making us late for our next appointment," the company explains on its website. "So we do not book anyone's special day that way."
- We also uncovered built-in wedding-based gratuities of up to 26 percent and found an eye-popping $7 per-person cake-cutting fee buried in some caterers' fine print. The Westin St. Louis, for instance, levies a 24 percent taxable service charge and a 5 percent taxable event fee. Add on the 10.179 percent sales tax that's applicable to any party, and an $18,000 wedding reception becomes a $25,584 affair, an increase of 42 percent.
- We couldn't discern differences among prices by florists, photo booth rental companies, or bakeries–where we asked for sheet cakes, not wedding cakes. When our shoppers were vague about their catering budgets–merely asking for a "moderately priced" sit-down banquet for 100–two opening proposals for weddings that we received were similar to those of the anniversary bashes. But comparing catering menus in general shows a huge pricing difference. At Mulino at Lake Isle, in Eastchester, N.Y., wedding banquets start at $125 per person in January and February; May to October weddings start at $140 per person. But for other types of banquets–meetings and parties, for instance–prices per person start at just $55. And those prices don't vary by season.

Bargaining for Brides

In all, we gathered prices from 40 vendors in 12 states. While those data points aren't enough to indict an entire industry, they're a warning to wedding shoppers to read fine print, ask smart questions, and negotiate before signing anything. In fact, in a few cases we found that it wasn't hard to strike good deals with those same vendors.

Caterers, for example, sometimes offer two banquet menus: one for weddings and another for other types of banquets. The wedding menu might share entrée

(continued on page 54)

LEARN

For details on how we conducted our wedding-service and wedding dress testing, and for more advice on saving money on weddings, go to ConsumerReports.org/weddingextras

COME-ONS, CAVEATS, AND OUTRIGHT CONS

Wedding shopping gotchas and how to avoid them

The Council of Better Business Bureaus (BBB), a national organization, received 5,663 consumer complaints in 2015 against caterers, formal-wear companies, florists, and other vendors associated with weddings. Most were about delivery problems. A search on BBB's website also identified some complaints about scams related to wedding services. Though you probably won't want to vet every product or service provider, we suggest doing so on major purchases or commitments. Here are ways not to get ripped off on the way to the altar.

FLY-BY-NIGHT PHOTOGRAPHER

On the wedding sites The Knot and Wedding Wire, we found reports of brides who paid for photos they never received, then couldn't track down the photographers. Of course, that could happen with other vendors, too.
What to do Before you hire any business, do your due diligence: Ask for references, and read customer reviews on The Knot, Wedding Wire, and other wedding sites. Check ratings and look out for complaints on the BBB's website; the organization usually follows up on legitimate gripes and strives to help consumers resolve disputes. Always insist on a signed contract, but read the fine print first.

GOWN ON DEEP DISCOUNT, CASH ONLY

Bridal shops in financial distress have been known to offer goods at fire-sale prices for cash up front. Then they close fast, stranding customers.
What to do Avoid such enticements. Use a credit card, which may help you get back your money.

BRIDAL SHOW COME-ONS

Visitors to bridal shows and expos may be invited to join—or be automatically enrolled in—contests, sweepstakes, and raffles. The prizes may be real, but they can come with hidden costs. An American Bridal Show event held in March in Edison, N.J., for instance, advertised four Grand Prize Honeymoon Giveaways, including seven nights and eight days of hotel accommodations. Tiny print noted that airfare and taxes were not included, and some locations required winners to purchase more expensive all-inclusive packages. Attendees may later get emails saying that they've won cookware or a vacation when the real goal is to sell time-shares or other goods and services. A bride from Superior, Wis., complained in February on the BBB site that putting her name on a bridal show list drew an unwelcome door-to-door vacuum-cleaner salesman.
What to do Don't register in advance. And share your contact information sparingly.

CHINESE KNOCKOFFS

Some brides order counterfeit versions of designer gowns for a fraction of the price. But that economic alternative could wind up crushing dreams instead of fulfilling them. A bride from Indiana learned that the hard way. In 2013 she paid $221.79 to a manufacturer in China to copy a $1,375 Justin Alexander design. We compared the counterfeit and original versions and saw that what she received had different fabric, a too-short train, and no tulle underskirt, among other flaws. The company offered a partial refund, and she wound up purchasing the real thing from her local bridal store.
What to do Think twice about ordering that way. And if an online company claims to sell a certain label, go to the manufacturer's site to make sure.

Should You Spring for a Wedding Planner?

Hiring a full-service wedding planner is like getting a theatrical director to produce and run the show, and manage the details. Planners say they can save clients money by sourcing the best and most reliable suppliers, often at insider prices.

But those skills and connections don't come cheap. When we asked planners in Boston; Lexington, Ky.; Salt Lake City; and Seattle to plan a reception for $20,000, their fees ranged from $700 for event coordination for one day to a full-service fee of $4,000.

A planner's value depends on your available time and money. Lyndsey Calico, co-owner of Planned to Perfection of the Bluegrass, in Lexington, Ky., once orchestrated a backyard wedding for a very busy bride whose budget was $6,000. Calico's cut was $1,000. She acknowledges, though, that her services generally aren't used for smaller weddings. "I'm a luxury item up there with videographer and favors," she says.

Full planning services—including help choosing the venue, caterer, color scheme, and florist, among others—can cost thousands of dollars. A number of brides and grooms we interviewed recommended hiring someone for month-of or day-of coordination services.

Day-of coordination can cost from $500 to about $3,000 and involves, among other tasks, ensuring that all participants and vendors arrive and do their jobs on schedule. Gideon and Erin Emmanuel of New Haven, Conn., saved money by having friends from their church handle day-of coordination for their October 2013 wedding. They gave back by doing the same for another couple in their church. Gideon acknowledges the stresses of the day, a 14-hour marathon, but adds, "That was our gift to them; it was a joy. But it was the craziest day of our shared lives."

and hors d'oeuvres options–at the same price as the regular banquet menu–but also include more choices and extras.

The Dish on Menus

At Mulino's, the venue in New York, a standard banquet involves nine entrée options of chicken (five choices) and fish (four options). By contrast, the wedding menu offers 17 entrée choices, including beef. When a shopper asked about using the banquet menu instead, the catering manager said that could be done–on a Friday or Sunday. Some items would not be included, but couples could pay to add options. But for a savings of at least $70 per plate, it seemed worth the compromise.

At Doolan's Shore Club in Spring Lake Heights, N.J., co-owner Susan Doolan agreed to provide her three-course, sit-down banquet–$60 per person including full bar and an hour of passed hors d'oeuvres–instead of a full wedding package, which ranges from $70 to $90 per person and includes a lot of extras. The banquet option would require add-on staff costs, though, and as with Mulino's, would be available only on Friday and Sunday. "On a wedding, there have to be some kinds of upcharges," Doolan said. "People are expecting a different level of service and quantity of food."

Even at DDG Classic Limousines, its seemingly airtight wedding ride policy got tweaked. The company permitted our wedding shopper to split the 2-hour minimum stretch limo ride into two 1-hour trips to and from the banquet venue, and not pay for the interim hours.

Helpful Vendors

Some vendors volunteered ways to save without our even asking. When one secret shopper said she didn't know how much to budget for centerpieces, Lori Goede of Skyway Creations, a Colorado Springs, Colo., florist, helpfully suggested an arrangement for just $25: a single flower floating in a glass globe, surrounded by colorful fall leaves. "That's an entry-level price," she explained.

(continued on page 56)

31 WAYS TO SAVE

Weddings are expensive. So we asked experts–planners, bridal industry insiders, and newlyweds–for their best strategies on how to keep a lid on costs.

ATTIRE

1. Rent a gown. Designer gowns, used and new, are available for a fraction of their original price, as we explain on page 50 (in "Can You Spot the $10,000 Gown?").

2. Buy a used gown or designer sample. Local thrift stores, including Goodwill, are sources. At The Bridal Garden in New York City, proceeds from the sale of donated new and used dresses go to charity. (We mention more options on page 51.)

VENUE

3. Get a catering estimate for the minimum guest count. You can add guests later, but late in the game it may be hard to subtract, notes wedding planner Michelle Culp, owner of Essence of Events in Seattle. "If you prepay for 100 and then you're only at 80, you could get charged for a guest count of 100," she says.

4. Choose a low-demand season or day. In many locations, January and February weddings are the least expensive. Friday night and Sunday weddings are less costly than those on Saturday nights. Weekdays are even better. Sierra Farinas from Elizabeth, N.J., is planning her wedding for Halloween this year—a Monday. "I had vendors pleading with me to make deals," she says.

5. Party before dinnertime. For instance, Vecoma at the Yellow River, a banquet hall in Snellville, Ga., offers "Over Before 5 p.m." specials for Saturday events that end before 5 p.m., starting at about $4,330 for 75 people, including the rental of the venue, food, beverages, service charges, and tax. By contrast, the same party on a Saturday night starts at about $7,000. Brunch, which typically has less costly entrées, is another good option. You'll probably save on alcohol, too.

6. Plan a destination wedding. This works well if it means you can streamline the guest list. The downside: It's an extra cost burden on friends and family.

7. Head to a restaurant. This is a good choice if the guest list isn't too huge, and you can opt for a nonpeak time such as Thursday night or Sunday daytime. "They can have bud vases on the tables; they can include the wine, beer, and the bar as part of the minimum; and often there is little to no space rental fee," says Jove Meyer, owner of Jove Meyer Events in Brooklyn, N.Y. "You can take care of a huge part of your wedding this way, and the space can be aesthetically gorgeous."

PHOTOGRAPHY, VIDEOGRAPHY, ENTERTAINMENT

8. Send the photographer home early. Pay for an hour less of service at the end of the party. Some guests already may have departed before the wedding is over, anyway. "It's redundant after a while," says Tiffany Dumas, owner of The Tiffany Studio in Brunswick, Maine.

9. Limit or skip the videography. Hire someone just for the ceremony.

10. Forego the lighting. "Uplights," spotlights, and other extras can add up. At Excel Entertainment in Paramus, N.J., for instance, a full lighting package can add $10,000 to a couple's bill, says owner Jason Frankel.

11. Shop for packages. Many entertainment companies will give discounts if you sign on for multiple services, such as a DJ and videography.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE VOORHEES

FOOD AND CATERING

12. Compare buffet and sit-down pricing. Though it's counterintuitive, sometimes a buffet costs more. You may save in labor costs, but people often eat more than at a sit-down meal, and they expect greater variety. "Typically you see people standing by the priciest dishes," notes Ravinder Kingra, a lecturer in food and beverage management at the Cornell University School of Hotel Administration.

13. Limit entrées. One meat selection, one chicken, and one vegetarian may be sufficient. "Don't worry about chicken looking cheap," says Amy Hardin, co-owner and a senior consultant at Details Weddings & Events, in Fort Smith, Ark. "You're never going to please everyone, so go with the simplest thing that makes you happy."

14. Go ahead and be creative. That could mean catering from a chain such as Panera Bread or calling in a small fleet of gourmet food trucks. Hardin says she has hired trucks that serve local favorites, including barbecue and "mac-and-cheese balls," and handmade, alcohol-spiked Popsicles.

15. Order from the "event" or "banquet" menu. In our research, we found that some caterers are willing to oblige. You won't get as many choices, or extras like a champagne toast, but you can save significantly. But don't hide the fact that it's a wedding; the deception could backfire in the form of less-than-stellar service.

16. Shed the tiers. Order a small, decorated "cutting cake" for photos, then serve sheet cake to guests, advises wedding planner Culp. Other delicious but less costly options include cookies, cupcakes, or donuts.

ALCOHOL

17. Limit the open bar. Restrict it to the cocktail hour, followed by a cash bar. Or provide drink tickets to guests; once they're used up, the bar becomes cash-only. "Leave the tickets under each guest's plate or put them in a gift bag that they get as they walk in," counsels Tonya Hoopes, owner of Hoopes Events in Salt Lake City.

18. Stick with the caterer's or venue's house spirits. And don't spring for premium brands. "Nobody cares or really knows," Culp says.

19. Serve beer and wine only. You can supplement with a punch or "signature drink" throughout the event or just during the cocktail hour, advises Lyndsey Calico, co-owner of the wedding planning firm Planned to Perfection of the Bluegrass, in Lexington, Ky. If the drink is premixed, she said, "it can be cheap."

20. BYOB. Find a caterer that lets you provide the booze. Let them hire a licensed bartender. Then you get to take home what's not used. "A lot of our caterers are open to that," Calico says.

FLOWERS, INVITATIONS, FAVORS

21. Shop online. Marcy Robles of Yonkers, N.Y., plans to use invitations printed by Vistaprint or Walmart for a spring 2017 ceremony. "I've used Vistaprint in the past, and they're very affordable," she says. When we checked Costco's online floral offerings, we viewed bargains, including nine mini-centerpiece arrangements in decorative pots for $119.99, and 18 "European mini-bouquets," with 15 stems each—vase not included—for $114.99, including shipping.

22. Use free technology. For their wedding in March, Lia Fox and Max Zhvanetsky of Seattle invited friends in person or over Skype but sent double-sided, printed cards to older guests expecting stationery. "The total cost was about $150," Fox says. RSVPs were delivered electronically.

23. Skip the place cards. Asking a maître d' or other venue employee to assign seats when guests enter may be cheaper than paying for cards and calligraphy. They end up in the garbage most of the time, anyway.

24. Forget the favors. "They're often a waste," Hardin declares. "People rarely take them." Or give something your guests will really use. Order enough for half of your guests, and still expect to see leftovers.

25. Instead of favors, donate to a charity. Put a card at each table noting your donation. You'll get a tax deduction, and you may inspire generosity from others.

TRANSPORTATION

26. Ask for the non-wedding limo rate. In our shopping, some limo services that quoted a wedding rate were willing to bend, either on the hourly rate or on the minimum number of hours required. That worked especially well when we said we needed a ride in only one direction.

27. Hire a car through Uber or another on-call service. Just understand that you're more likely to get a Prius than a Porsche.

EVERYTHING ELSE

28. Understand the contract before signing. Check for buried fees and requirements. "A venue can put in that you have to pay for two cases of their alcohol," Culp notes. "Or a photographer can say that he can bring in an extra photographer if he wants to, at an additional cost."

29. Negotiate. Be brave. "All the vendor can do is say no," Culp says.

30. Look beyond the venue's preferred vendors. Unless this is a requirement to rent the space, you may find better deals elsewhere. We found that using the website Thumbtack was an easy way to request and compare bids from photographers, caterers, and other vendors.

31. Be realistic about DIY. Consider the amount of labor and time involved for do-it-yourself tasks before committing yourself or others. "Doing the flowers means getting them at the flower market at 6 in the morning, unloading them, cleaning them, cutting them; buying, unwrapping, and storing the vessels; and bringing them all to the venue," Meyer warns. "People are like, 'I'll just do it.' But who's going to get up that early?"

Tiffany Dumas, owner of The Tiffany Studio, a photography vendor in Brunswick, Maine, recommended a contract for just 2 to 3 hours of a 4-hour wedding reception. "By then you've got all your group shots, and some people already have left," she explained.

Still, she defended photographers' pricing. "Before I even begin shooting, I've probably spent 3 to 4 hours getting to know the bride and groom, and planning the itinerary," she explains. Afterward, she could spend 8 to 10 hours fixing shots.

Who's Paying, and How?

In addition to bargaining, couples should try to establish a budget and stick with it.

When the Consumer Reports National Research Center surveyed 464 Americans who'd had a wedding reception in the last five years, 78 percent of those newlyweds reported they had budgeted for their reception. But almost two-thirds said they had overspent by at least 20 percent.

In our survey, couples paid for about half–47 percent–of the reception's cost. Thirty-nine percent of the cost was borne by parents; friends and other relatives covered the rest.

Same-sex couples in our sample–about 20 percent of the newlywed respondents–reported being more likely than heterosexual couples to rely on friends and relatives other than their parents.

How Much Should a Guest Give?

Americans spend a median $69 on wedding gifts, according to an online survey of 5,000 Americans conducted in February by the Consumer Reports National Research Center. Northeasterners spent the most: a median $102, vs. $64 for those from the Midwest and West, and $66 for those from the South. Nationwide, men said they gave $75, on average; women spent $64.

No surprise, higher earners gave more; wedding guests with household incomes of $80,000 or more gave, on average, $96. Those with incomes below $50,000 gave an average $53.

Almost half of respondents—47 percent—said they spend less than $75 on a wedding gift. An additional 15 percent said, "It depends on the wedding."

To afford the bill, 41 percent of respondents said they withdrew from savings. But 11 percent took out a loan from a bank or credit union, 10 percent borrowed from a 401(k) or 403(b) account, and 10 percent withdrew from other investments. Nine percent, all under age 50, withdrew some money from a 401(k), 403(b), or IRA–a move that generally triggers a tax penalty, not to mention a potential threat to retirement savings.

Say Yes to Less

Two-thirds of respondents took at least three steps to save money on their wedding. Thirty-seven percent bought items on sale or at a discount; 35 percent trimmed the guest list; 35 percent chose a less costly menu; and 34 percent made favors or other items themselves.

In a 2014 study of 3,000 people in the U.S. who had been married for some time in their lives, two economics professors from Emory University found that couples who spent the least on their wedding were less likely to divorce. It was possible, one of the researchers later told The Emory Wheel, the university's student newspaper, that couples with lavish weddings might be the ones "who tend not to be the best match."

Or perhaps it's that tying the knot on a shoestring takes communication, teamwork, and the ability to compromise–all useful skills for a sound marriage.

ONCE MORE WITH FEELING

Spending on second and third weddings is higher than you might expect. And the more times people get married, the more they tend to splurge.

Subsequent chances at love often tug at the heartstrings—and purse strings. The Wedding Report, an industry publication, says the average second wedding costs $14,803, roughly $10,000 less than the average first wedding, but not an insignificant sum.

Notably, costs jump to $38,701 for third and subsequent weddings. How to explain that?

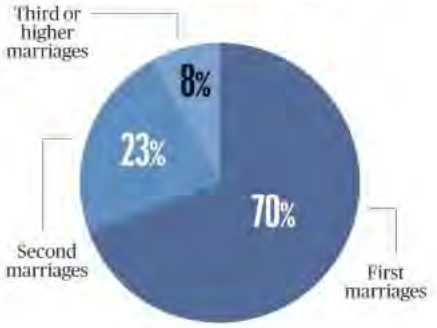
"With third weddings, couples are older and more established, and family may be far-flung," notes Sharon Naylor, author of "1001 Ways to Have a Dazzling Second Wedding" (The Career Press, 2001). "They may plan a five-day event and bring everybody in, or take everyone on a cruise."

Etiquette experts say it's not acceptable for the more-than-once married to ask for cash. But, in some cases, it's okay to set up a registry, target a charity, or seek donations toward the honeymoon via a website such as Honeyfund.

Some, though, still take a modest approach the second time around. When Paul Rothkopf and Elaine Ferreira of Summit, N.J., wed in 2013—a second marriage for both—the party was in the backyard; snacks and desserts were provided mainly by Rothkopf's sister; and the couple served wine and beer, no harder alcohol. "For far less than $5,000, we had a beautiful day for 50 close friends," Rothkopf recalls.

—Kenrya Rankin

A BREAKDOWN OF THOSE WHO MARRIED IN 2010



Source: National Center for Family & Marriage Research.

ROAD REPORT

RATINGS FROM OUR TEST TRACK *plus* EXPERT CAR ADVICE

In Pursuit of Used Car Happiness

Opting for an almost new car allows you to upgrade your aspirations

by Michelle Naranjo

HONDA CR-V
Ready to last 200,000 miles.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY EDMON DE HARO

BUYING A USED CAR doesn't have to be a compromise. It can be an opportunity to own a more substantial make and model you may not be able to afford on the new-car market.

The median price paid for a recent-model used car—one built since 2011—is $18,000 when purchased from a used-car dealer and $21,000 from a franchised new-car dealer, according to a recent Consumer Reports national survey.

That may seem like a lot, but it's about $10,000 less than the median cost of a new car these days. And what you can find for your money may surprise you.

If those figures are in your price range, we recommend buying the most recent model year available with the widest array of safety and technology features. Most 3- to 5-year-old luxury vehicles haven't depreciated to that price range yet, but there's still a lot of value. For example, instead of buying a brand-new Honda Civic, you may be able to afford a gently used Honda Accord with a more luxurious trim package, quieter interior, and smoother ride.

Here's a little secret about depreciation: The new-car premium you pay for a tricked-out vehicle often vanishes the second time around. As new technology evolves, the old-tech gadgets depreciate faster than the rest of the car, according to data from TrueCar. Most cars are worth about half their sticker price when they hit the three-year mark, but technology loses a larger chunk of its value as its relative obsolescence gets factored in.

But no matter the pedigree, you'll want to have the car inspected by a certified mechanic before buying. Every factory can have a bad day, and it's also good to determine for certain how well a car was treated by its previous owner.

That said, what follows is our list of the four gently used vehicles that hit CR's sweet spot, performing well in our road tests as well as having strong reliability, excellent safety credentials, and a wallet-friendly price range. Try to look for one that has traveled less than 50,000 miles and may still be under the manufacturer's warranty.

THE FAB FOUR: USED CARS THAT GO THE DISTANCE

$15,825-$18,650

$20,675-$22,450

$19,300-$21,300

$19,750-$22,150

2013 TOYOTA PRIUS

This Consumer Reports Top Pick gives you great bang for your buck and saves you money at the gas pump. The top-line Prius Five trim level—not to be confused with the Prius V wagon—had an original sticker price just a hair over $30,000. It comes well-equipped with a navigation system, a backup camera, faux-leather heated front seats, a power driver's seat, 17-inch aluminum wheels, LED headlights, and fog lights.

Price when new: *$30,005*
Price range when used: *$15,825-$18,650*

2012 TOYOTA CAMRY

At the upper end of the budget is the 2012 Toyota Camry XLE with a gutsy V6 powerplant. The Camry is known for reliability, and at this trim level comes with 17-inch aluminum wheels, automatic climate control, and built-in navigation. But the real story is its safety features—blind-spot monitoring (optional), automatic dusk-sensing headlamps, and emergency braking assist that gives your brakes extra stopping power if you suddenly stab the pedal.

Price when new: *$30,015*
Price range when used: *$20,675-$22,450*

2012 HONDA ACCORD

For a stylish car with proven reliability and amenities like heated leather seats, Bluetooth, keyless entry, and an upgraded stereo with USB and navigation (optional), the 2012 Honda Accord EX-L sedan or coupe was a whistling $32,000 when new. Now models with less than 50,000 miles on the odometer are easily in the range of a typical used-car budget.

Price when new: *$32,030*
Price range when used: *$19,300-$21,300*

2011 TOYOTA RAV4

The 2011 Toyota RAV4 Limited is the best bet for a used compact SUV. This trim level comes with front-wheel or all-wheel drive. More intriguing is a choice of a four-cylinder or V6 engine—the V6 making this a quick, smooth, and effortless crossover vehicle. Known for its carlike agility, good gas mileage, and easy cabin access, the 2011 RAV4 isn't a budget breaker. The Limited trim came standard with 17-inch aluminum wheels and cruise control.

Price when new: *$28,875*
Price range when used: *$19,750-$22,150*

Best of the Rest

Here are 14 other standout vehicles that fall within our price and age guidelines. If you don't need all-wheel drive where you live, the two-wheel-drive versions will probably be less expensive.

SMALL CARS

2014 Hyundai Elantra Limited
PRICE RANGE
$16,725-$17,925

2012 Subaru Impreza
PRICE RANGE
$16,125-$16,750

MIDSIZED CARS

2013 Kia Optima EX
PRICE RANGE
$16,825-$18,375

2012 Mazda6 s Grand Touring
PRICE RANGE
$17,250-$19,150

LUXURY CARS

2012 Buick Regal GS
PRICE RANGE
$20,925-$23,050

2012 Lincoln MKZ Hybrid
PRICE RANGE
$18,325-$20,825

SPORTS CARS

2011 Chevrolet Camaro LT
PRICE RANGE
$18,325-$20,100

2011 Mazda MX-5 Grand Touring
PRICE RANGE
$18,350-$19,825

WAGONS & MINIVANS

2014 Mazda5 Grand Touring
PRICE RANGE
$19,000-$21,500

2013 Toyota Prius V
PRICE RANGE
$18,275-$21,175

SMALL SUVs

2013 Mazda CX-5 Touring AWD
PRICE RANGE
$17,775-$21,150

2011 Honda CR-V EX-L AWD
PRICE RANGE
$20,650-$22,275

MIDSIZED SUVs

2011 Nissan Murano SV AWD
PRICE RANGE
$20,400-$23,500

PICKUPS

2011 Nissan Frontier SV Crew Cab 4WD
PRICE RANGE
$21,300-$23,725

10 CARS MOST LIKELY TO LAST 200,000 MILES

Of the 740,000 vehicles represented in our annual reliability survey, these are the 10 cars, minivans, SUVs, and trucks that our respondents most often reported as having more than 200,000 miles on the odometer.

1. Honda Accord
2. Toyota Camry
3. Honda Odyssey
4. Honda Civic
5. Toyota Prius
6. Toyota Sienna
7. Honda CR-V
8. Toyota Corolla
9. Toyota 4Runner
10. Ford F-150

Why Haggling Really Pays

Our national Used Car Buying Survey shows that shoppers can save big when they negotiate

by Mark Rechtin

ALMOST HALF OF all American adults currently drive a car they bought used. And one-third of all used-car buyers considered getting a new car but ended up with a used one. Given the durability and reliability of many cars, buying used is becoming a better bet than it once was.

Consumer Reports is a strong believer that buying a relatively recent used car, one in sound mechanical condition and equipped with most of the latest safety and connectivity features, is the best way to get the most for your money.

Our survey of 1,006 Americans who purchased a used car from model year 2000 or later during the past five years shows that–just as when buying new–there's quite a bit of flexibility when it comes to price.

Those who used the asking price as a starting-off point for negotiations often ended up with a lower purchase price, whether buying from a franchised new-car dealer, an independent used-car dealer, or a private party.

In our survey, 70 percent of used-car buyers haggled over the price, succeeding in getting a better deal 83 percent of the time. And the reported savings for being a savvy negotiator were impressive: The median was $900, or 8 percent less than the asking price.

So what's the most successful strategy used by effective hagglers? Turns

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY EDMON DE HARO

out it's the straightforward approach–simply asking for a better price. It worked for 68 percent of successful negotiators. Other tactics included sharing with the seller the value of similar cars researched online or threatening to walk away, which worked for 48 percent and 28 percent of successful hagglers, respectively.

How People Shop

Almost half of all used-car buyers check out Kelley Blue Book or Black Book for a vehicle's estimated value before shelling out cash. A similar number of respondents said they also researched a car's history on Carfax or AutoCheck, although that practice dropped considerably for those buying from private-party buyers, with just 25 percent doing so.

Regardless of where you buy a car, Consumer Reports strongly encourages you to have it inspected by a certified mechanic to ensure there are no nasty surprises. Yet only 41 percent of surveyed shoppers who bought from a private party or a used-car dealer had their car checked out by a mechanic, and just 36 percent who bought from a new-car dealership did so. That was despite concerns voiced by shoppers about "unknowingly buying a car that was in an accident" or from "untrustworthy salespeople."

One final cautionary note when buying from a private party: Find somewhere public to meet. There are many stories on the Internet about people being robbed during a deal. In our survey, at least one-third of private-party buyers weren't familiar with the sellers, but only about one-fifth met up with one at a public location. More than half went to the seller's home; 16 percent said they had the car brought to their home.

Consumer Reports says it's preferable to meet on neutral turf, both for safety reasons and to blunt any "home-field advantage" sellers may have.

WHEN EXTENDED WARRANTIES ARE WORTH IT

Most new- and used-car dealers offer customers a free, limited warranty that covers a car for the first 60 to 90 days of ownership. In fact, some states require a minimum warranty period on any used car sold by a dealership.

Yet relatively few problems arise during that time period. That's why dealers and third-party companies offer customers an extended warranty.

Think of it as repair insurance once the manufacturer's warranty has expired. With such coverage, used-car owners reported paying a median of $1,000 for future service work they may never need if the car is reliable. But if hit by an expensive doozy of a problem—such as a busted camshaft or a blown head gasket—car owners may be glad they have an extended warranty. That is, if the warranty company pays the claim.

Consumer Reports has discouraged consumers from purchasing an extended warranty for a number of products, including cars. Why? It's rare that the premium you pay will equal the amount of a paid repair claim down the line.

On the flip side, it's just as rare to find a used car that has a confirmed history and all maintenance and repair receipts since it was new. And Consumer Reports has found that vehicle-history firms like Carfax and AutoCheck don't catch all of the accidents that cars may have been involved in, especially if no insurance paperwork for the accident was filed or if a salvage history was "wiped."

WASTED MONEY?

According to our survey, only about half of those who purchased an extended warranty for a used car from model year 2000 or later actually filed a claim over the past five years. That's a lot of money spent for peace of mind. But most of those who filed repair claims wound up relying on their extended warranty multiple times.

About 30 percent of used-car purchasers who had owned their car for a year or less and purchased an extended warranty to cover it needed to use that warranty in the first year of ownership.

But two-thirds of drivers needed that additional coverage in years two through five of ownership.

And while the extended-warranty industry has taken a bad rap for not paying claims, 84 percent of used-car buyers who had to use their extended warranty said that all of their claims were honored. And 82 percent of all extended-warranty buyers said they would consider getting one again.

That said, we suggest setting aside the money you would spend on a warranty premium for a rainy-day repair instead.

How to Pick the Best Way to Pay

When it comes to buying a used car, consumer satisfaction with the deal varies greatly depending on whether the buyer financed the car or paid cash in full.

About 70 percent of used cars purchased at a franchised new or independent used-car dealership are financed. By comparison, less than 20 percent of private-party transactions are financed.

Those who financed a car they acquired at a used-car dealership were the least satisfied with the deal they got. And they're the only group for whom less than half were highly satisfied with the price they ended up paying.

Percentage of used-car owners "highly satisfied" with the deal they got for their car. Source: Consumer Reports 2015 Used Car Buying Survey.

More Than a Pretty Face

Kia has been offering buyers competent, stylish cars at prices that undercut rivals. But that low price came at the expense of refinement. As with the Sorento last year, the 2016 Optima shows that Kia has turned a corner. It still looks great, and now it comes with more substance.

MIDSIZED SEDANS

Kia Optima

OVERALL SCORE 81

WHY IS IT that some cars fly under the radar? You think more people would know about a certain vehicle and embrace its goodness. And yet, for whatever reason, the model doesn't catch on with the mainstream.

Such is the case with the Kia Optima. It's more eye-catching than other family sedans, but Kia sells half as many Optimas as the safe-bet Toyota Camry and Honda Accord.

A redesign for 2016 brings a new air of mainstream opulence to the Optima. It has improved ride comfort, better handling and braking, and a roomier interior. But it's also so loaded with standard and smartly priced optional features that you feel like you got more than you paid for.

We tested a midlevel EX, which has a smooth 185-hp, 2.4-liter four-cylinder, mated to a quick-shifting six-speed automatic transmission.

Its 8-second 0-to-60 time is about a half-second quicker than the equivalent Camry and is sprightly for freeway merging. Though the Optima's fuel economy is a respectable 28 mpg, a few competitors do get more than 30 mpg.

And unlike many family sedans that provide a smoother ride at the expense of precise handling, the Optima strikes a fine balance between comfort and sharp cornering.

There's a firmness to the Optima's ride that's evocative of higher-priced European sedans. However, tire noise becomes noticeable on coarse pavement. The brake pedal has a firm feel, and the Optima has a shorter stopping distance than many competitors have.

Understated competence reigns inside the new Optima. Its large door openings make it easy to get in and out, and the wide and supportive leather driver's seat is tearoom plush, complete with four-way power lumbar adjustment.

The Kia has a sloping, tapered roofline that mimics the shape of other trendy, modern sedans. Such a silhouette can make rear seats seem claustrophobic, but the Optima's commodious cabin has plenty of room.

The array of infotainment and climate controls is well-placed and easy to use, with a businesslike arrangement of familiar knobs and buttons.

Not that everything is perfect. The low dash vents are more likely to freeze your elbow than cool your face. And scrolling through music is irritating on the small, 5-inch radio screen.

Safety systems aren't well distributed across the model line. Blind-spot detection and rear cross-traffic alert are optional on the EX, but you're forced to step up to the SX if you want forward-collision warning with automatic emergency braking; even then, it's part of a $4,800 option package.

Aside from that overpriced option array, the Optima is a great value story. At $25,860, our EX came with 17-inch wheels, dual-zone automatic climate control and leather seats (heated up front), along with a heated steering wheel. Comparably equipped competitors cost thousands more.

Kia's reliability record has been improving, although not to Camry levels. With the 2016 edition, the new Optima offers an enjoyable driving experience, along with considerably more substance and refinement. It may be time to switch away from the easy choice.

TESTED VEHICLE	
ROAD-TEST SCORE	86
HIGHS	Roomy interior, seat comfort, controls, braking, lots of equipment for price
LOWS	Expensive to get active safety equipment, A/C dash vents located too low
POWERTRAIN	185-hp, 2.4-liter 4-cyl.; 178-hp, 1.6-liter 4-cyl. turbo; 245-hp, 2.0-liter 4-cyl. turbo; 193-hp, 2.0-liter 4-cyl. hybrid; six-speed automatic; seven-speed automated manual; front-wheel drive
FUEL	28 mpg
PRICE	$22,840-$36,740

STYLING TRICK Rear-seat passengers ride in comfort despite the tapered roofline.

PHOTOS: JOHN POWERS

A Work Truck, Plain and Simple

While full-sized pickup trucks increasingly adopt luxury trappings, compact trucks remain utilitarian workhorses. The Tacoma is a reliable but down-and-dirty example of function trumping form.

COMPACT TRUCKS

Toyota Tacoma

OVERALL SCORE 54

THE TACOMA is the perfect truck for landscapers and contractors.

This beast of burden has a bulletproof reliability track record, a tough-as-nails chassis, and a durable composite-plastic bed. For off-roading adventures, the capable Tacoma has few peers.

And though the price nears that of discounted full-sized trucks, the compact Tacoma tenaciously holds its value.

Hence, the Tacoma's cult following. But make no mistake, the Tacoma drives like a primitive, agricultural-era relic.

For all of Toyota's claims that this is an all-new truck, key features seem as though Toyota slept through the past decade's advances in truck technology and interior design.

Today's modern full-sized trucks feature a quiet cabin, a semblance of handling responsiveness, and a tolerable ride. But the compact Tacoma has none of that.

Unlike other V6-powered Toyota models, our tested Tacoma never feels quick from a standing start or when passing–despite the robust acceleration figures as measured on our track. Fuel economy with the not-so-smooth six-speed automatic transmission is 19 mpg overall on regular gas, quite good for a truck and a clear improvement over its predecessor.

Out on the road, the Tacoma's handling is ponderous, and its slow and numb steering never connects the driver to the front wheels. Clearly clumsy around corners, it never felt unsafe. The chassis's propensity to jiggle and shudder delivers a Metallica snare-drum beat to your spine. Wind and engine noise drown out any chance of conversation, even at modest speeds. Braking performance is subpar.

Inside, it still has a too-high step-in, a too-low driver's seat, and a ceiling that scrapes scalps of those entering the cabin.

The front seats are flat and uncomfortable, have limited support, and offer only the most basic adjustments. The rear seat in our crew cab is no better, with hard padding, cramped leg and foot room, and short cushions–although it flips up to reveal useful storage bins.

Outward visibility is decent, but the narrow, shallow windows make it less commanding.

Controls are basic and easy to read–essential when reaching for some of the faraway knobs and buttons.

True to its heritage as a work truck, the Tacoma admirably tolerates those sorts of duties. It trundled up our rock hill with ease. The damped tailgate is a charm to lower but a chore to raise. And though it varies based on the body and powertrain, our truck is rated to tow 6,400 pounds–that's a 23-foot Airstream trailer, folks.

Although a rear camera is standard, the Tacoma is not available with common advanced active-safety features such as forward-collision warning and lane-departure mitigation. Blind-spot monitoring is available on ritzier versions.

By contrast, the competing Chevrolet Colorado is more modern-feeling, and the coming Honda Ridgeline will aim for refinement. Sure, you can outfit a Tacoma with leather trim, a premium stereo, and a moonroof. But for that price you can get a full-sized pickup with increased hauling capabilities, a roomier cabin, and a more comfortable ride.

HANDY CUBBY The rear seats flip up to reveal hidden storage bins for valuables or tools.

TESTED VEHICLE	
ROAD-TEST SCORE	46
HIGHS	Fuel economy, resale value, reliability, off-road capability
LOWS	Ride, handling, braking, noise, driving position
POWERTRAIN	159-hp, 2.7-liter 4-cyl.; 278-hp, 3.5-liter V6; 5-speed manual, 6-speed manual, or 6-speed automatic transmission; two- or four-wheel drive
FUEL	19 mpg
PRICE	$24,200-$38,720

PHOTOS: JOHN POWERS

Long-Distance Cruiser

This is not a once-over touch-up. Toyota makes some suspension tweaks to improve the large sedan's ride, and adds optional safety gear.

LARGE SEDANS

Toyota Avalon

OVERALL SCORE 79

FOR ITS MIDCYCLE change, the updated Avalon boasts an improved suspension and additional safety features.

Toyota has rectified the current Avalon's main shortcoming: a stiff, unbecoming ride. The upgrade delivers compliant–but not floaty–passage that befits a near-luxury sedan and long-distance cruiser.

Though more at home on flat highways than curvy back roads, the Avalon still demonstrates safe, secure handling.

Toyota also made forward-collision prevention systems available, but only on the top Limited trim. Toyota says the feature will be standard across the line by the end of 2017.

Other Avalon traits remain unsullied. The V6 engine has no shortage of power, and the six-speed automatic delivers smooth, timely gear changes. That combination provides an impressive 24 mpg overall. The hybrid version returns 36 mpg, sacrificing some acceleration and trunk space.

The Avalon's interior is roomy and well-appointed, but neither a power-adjustable steering column nor a heated steering wheel is available. The Avalon will probably deliver years of headache-free ownership–now with the ride comfort owners have come to expect from a car of this ilk.

TESTED VEHICLE	
ROAD-TEST SCORE	80
HIGHS	Ride, quietness, acceleration, fuel economy, rear-seat room
LOWS	Agility, daytime running lights too easy to cancel
POWER-TRAIN	268-hp, 3.5-liter V6; six-speed automatic; front-wheel drive
FUEL	24 mpg
PRICE	$33,485-$42,785

Ratings: Midsized Sedans and Compact Pickup Trucks

Scores in context: Recommended models did well in our road-test score and had average or better predicted reliability. They also performed adequately in government or insurance-industry crash tests, if tested. The Overall Score factors in road-test score, reliability, safety, and owner satisfaction. For full Ratings, available to online subscribers, check out ConsumerReports.org/cars

☑ Recommended

Better ◀ ● ◓ ○ ◒ ● ▶ Worse

Recommended	Rank	MAKE & MODEL	PRICE		RELIABILITY	SAFETY	ROAD-TEST RESULTS									
			As Tested	OVERALL SCORE	Predicted	Front Crash Prevention	Road-Test Score	Overall MPG	Acceleration, 0-60 MPH, Sec.	Dry Braking, 60-0 MPH, Ft.	Avoidance-Maneuver Speed, MPH	Routine Handling	Ride/Noise	Seat Comfort, Front/Rear	Driving Position	Controls
MIDSIZED SEDANS																
☑	1	**Subaru Legacy** 2.5i Premium	$24,837	83	◓	Opt.	89	26	10.2	128	55.5	◓	●/◓	◓/◓	●	●
☑	2	**Toyota Camry** LE (4-cyl.)	$24,089	83	●	Opt.	84	28	8.6	131	53.5	◓	◓/◓	◓/◓	◓	◓
☑	3	**Honda Accord** LX (4-cyl.)	$23,270	82	◓	Opt.	85	30	7.7	136	53.0	◓	◓/◓	◓/◓	●	◓
☑	4	**Kia Optima** EX (2.4L)	$25,860	81	○*	Opt.	86	28	8.0	130	51.5	◓	◓/◓	●/●	◓	●
☑	5	**Mazda6** Sport	$23,590	77	◓	Opt.	79	32	7.5	132	53.0	◓	○/○	◓/◓	◓	◓
☑	6	**Ford Fusion** SE (1.5T)	$27,720	77	○	Opt.	81	24	9.2	125	52.5	●	●/◓	○/◓	◓	◓
☑	7	**Hyundai Sonata** SE (2.4L)	$23,315	76	◓	Opt.	78	28	9.2	139	50.5	○	◓/◓	◓/●	◓	●
☑	8	**Volkswagen Passat** SE (1.8T)	$27,485	76	○	Opt.	82	28	8.6	129	52.5	◓	◓/◓	◓/●	◓	◓
	9	**Nissan Altima** 2.5 S	$23,410	62	◒	Opt.	77	31	8.2	140	51.5	○	◓/◓	◓/◓	◓	●
	10	**Chrysler 200** Limited (4-cyl.)	$25,790	51	●	Opt.	63	30	9.8	130	53.5	○	○/○	○/○	○	◓
COMPACT PICKUP TRUCKS																
	1	**Toyota Tacoma** SR5 (V6)	$34,364	54	◓	NA	46	19	8.2	146	46.0	◒	◒/◒	◒/◒	◒	◓
	2	**Chevrolet Colorado** LT (V6)	$34,300	51	●	Opt.	69	18	7.5	132	48.5	○	◒/○	◒/○	○	●

*Based on limited data. Models that scored too low in Overall Score are not recommended.

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INDEX

A

- Air conditioners ... Jul 15, 18
- American-made products ... Jul 15, 13; Jul 15, 24
- Antibiotics ... Dec 15, 11
  - in meat ... Jan 16, 40; Jun 16, 8
- Audio equipment
  - as gifts ... Dec 15, 40

AUTOMOBILE RATINGS:

- BMW 750i ... May 16, 66
- Cadillac Escalade ... Jul 15, 55
- Chevrolet Colorado ... Aug 15, 57
- Chevrolet Trax ... Oct 15, 59
- Dodge Challenger ... Aug 15, 58
- Fiat 500X ... Jan 16, 59
- Ford Edge ... Nov 15, 62
- Ford F-150 ... Aug 15, 56
- Ford Mustang ... Aug 15, 58
- Honda Civic ... May 16, 67
- Honda HR-V ... Oct 15, 58
- Hyundai Tucson ... Jan 16, 57
- Jeep Renegade ... Oct 15, 59
- Kia Optima ... Jun 16, 62
- Kia Sorento ... Jul 15, 55
- Land Rover Discovery Sport ... Nov 15, 62
- Lexus NX ... Sep 15, 58
- Lexus RX ... May 16, 65
- Lincoln MKX ... May 16, 64
- Lincoln Navigator ... Jul 15, 55
- Mazda CX-3 ... Jan 16, 58
- Mitsubishi Outlander ... Feb 16, 59
- Nissan Maxima ... Dec 15, 71
- Nissan Murano ... Jul 15, 55
- Scion iM ... Feb 16, 58
- scoring system ... Apr 16, 8
- Toyota Tacoma ... Jun 16, 63
- Volvo V60 Cross Country ... Sep 15, 59
- Volvo XC90 ... Jan 16, 56

AUTOMOBILES & AUTO EQUIPMENT:

- American-made ... Jul 15, 52
- Audi TT ... Mar 16, 56
- automatic braking ... Jun 16, 8
- batteries ... Jan 16, 53
- best & worst for 2015 ... Oct 15, 53
- brand report card ... Apr 16, 23
- Chevrolet Camaro 2016 redesign ... Aug 15, 59
- child safety seats ... Sep 15, 55; Feb 16, 55
- choosing a car ... Apr 16, 16
- coming in 2016 ... Apr 16, 20
- deals, summer ... Aug 15, 64
- driving, winter ... Nov 15, 52
- family vehicles ... Sep 15, 52
- as gifts ... Dec 15, 46
- headlights
  - new technology ... Jul 15, 60
- insurance, rate setting ... Sep 15, 28
- Mazda CX-3 ... Oct 15, 57
- Mazda MX-5 Miata ... Mar 16, 57
- mechanics ... Mar 16, 53
- new for 2016 ... Oct 15, 50
- oil consumption ... Aug 15, 61
- owner satisfaction ... Jan 16, 49
- profiles, 2016 ... Apr 16, 32
- Ratings, 2015 ... Apr 16, 70
- reliability ... Dec 15, 62; Apr 16, 86
- safety
  - features ... Apr 16, 24
  - rear seat ... Sep 15, 9
- Scion iA ... Mar 16, 58
- self-driving cars ... May 16, 44
- Smart ForTwo ... Mar 16, 59
- SUVs
  - small ... Oct 15, 56
- Tesla Model S P85D ... Oct 15, 60
- tires ... Apr 16, 84
  - treadwear ... Nov 15, 57
- top picks for 2016 ... Apr 16, 10
- Toyota Prius ... Apr 16, 14
- used cars ... Apr 16, 79
  - shopping ... Jun 16, 57
- Volkswagen Jetta ... Feb 16, 59

B–D

- Banks & financial institutions
  - services ... Jan 16, 24
- Bathroom remodeling ... Sep 15, 38
- Batteries ... Dec 15, 36
- Beef
  - ground, safety ... Oct 15, 26
  - tenderized, safety labeling ... Aug 15, 8
- Cabinets, kitchen ... Aug 15, 34
- Cameras
  - digital ... Oct 14, 47; Nov 15, 9
- Caramel coloring, safety ... Sep 15, 8
- Cash
  - as a gift ... Dec 15, 57
- Charities ... Dec 15, 23
- Chicken
  - food safety ... Jun 16, 8
- Clothes dryers ... Nov 15, 16
- Cloud services ... Feb 16, 13
- Coffee
  - cold-brew ... Jun 16, 23
- Computers ... Jan 16, 21
  - convertible tablets ... May 16, 24
  - laptops
    - reliability ... Sep 15, 48; Jan 16, 18
  - software, security ... Jul 15, 46
- Consumer action
  - advertising, deceptive, YouTube ... Aug 15, 8
  - airline prices ... Oct 15, 9
  - cell phones
    - radiation ... Nov 15, 10
  - Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, Congressional weakening of ... Oct 15, 9
  - consumer rights ... Nov 15, 8
  - cost ... Nov 15, 12
  - credit reports ... Nov 15, 9
  - financial adviser legislation ... Jul 15, 8
  - meat and antibiotics ... Jul 15, 8
  - medical bills, protesting ... Aug 15, 8; Nov 15, 46
  - National Highway Traffic Safety Administration funding ... Sep 15, 9
  - reverse mortgages ... Sep 15, 9
  - unfair lending practices ... Jul 15, 8
- Consumer heroism
  - Medicare Fraud Strike Force ... Oct 15, 8
  - robocalls ... Aug 15, 8
- Consumer victories, telecommunications, Lifeline phone discounts ... Sep 15, 9
- Consumers Union Safe Patient Project ... Oct 15, 9
- Cooktops ... Aug 15, 40
- Counterfeit products ... Jul 15, 32
- Countertops ... Dec 15, 11
  - bathroom ... Sep 15, 38
  - kitchen ... Aug 15, 32
- Credit cards
  - benefits of ... Aug 15, 13
  - rewards ... Dec 15, 26
  - security ... Jul 15, 21
- Crowdfunding
  - scams ... Jan 16, 10
- Customer service ... Sep 15, 10
- Dishwashers ... Aug 15, 46; Feb 16, 13
  - detergents ... May 16, 25
  - drying function ... Jun 16, 26
  - odors ... Mar 16, 15
- Doctors
  - disciplinary status ... May 16, 30
- Driveway patches ... Mar 16, 20
- Drugs
  - anti-aging ... Aug 15, 16
  - antibiotics, misuse ... Aug 15, 20
  - Mucinex Fast-Max recall ... Jul 15, 21
  - pain relievers ... Jun 16, 28
  - prescription ... Nov 15, 9
  - pricing ... Jan 16, 13
  - sleeping pills ... Feb 16, 22
- Dryers ... May 16, 56

E–G

- Electronics
  - as gifts ... Dec 15, 32
  - shopping for ... Dec 15, 37
- Energy costs ... Oct 15, 38
  - cutting ... Oct 15, 44
- Energy Star program ... Oct 15, 42
- Exercise equipment ... Feb 16, 14
- Facial recognition ... Feb 16, 40
- Financial planners ... Dec 15, 6
- Fireplaces
  - gas ... Feb 16, 9
- Fitness trackers ... Feb 16, 20
- Flooring, kitchen ... Aug 15, 36
- Flower delivery ... May 16, 26
- Food
  - as gifts ... Dec 15, 28
    - food baskets ... Dec 15, 38
  - history of Consumer Reports advocacy ... May 16, 52
  - industry practices ... May 16, 50
  - irradiation ... Dec 15, 6
  - labeling
    - dates ... Dec 15, 14
    - GMO ... Mar 16, 8
    - "natural" ... Mar 16, 10
    - prepared ... Mar 16, 38
- 401(k) plans ... Oct 15, 13
- Generators ... Oct 15, 16
- Gift cards ... Dec 15, 44
- Gift etiquette ... Dec 15, 53
- Gift-wrapping services ... Dec 15, 24
- Grills
  - Brinkmann Patio 810-6230-S, Don't Buy ... Jul 15, 49

H–K

- Headphones ... Oct 15, 24
- Herbicide, homemade ... Aug 15, 8
- Home appliances
  - as gifts ... Dec 15, 48; Dec 15, 54
- Home improvements ... Nov 15, 13
  - for increasing value ... Mar 16, 30
- Home ownership
  - financing ... Mar 16, 34
  - trends ... Mar 16, 26
- Home renovation ... Jun 16, 40
- Homeopathy ... Mar 16, 15
- Hospitals
  - infections at ... Sep 15, 22; Oct 15, 5
- Humidifiers ... Jan 16, 9
- In-home care ... Jan 16, 12
- Insect repellents ... Jul 15, 34
- Insurance ... Dec 15, 11
  - for pets ... May 16, 12
- Internet
  - service ... Aug 15, 48
- Irons ... Nov 15, 16
- Juice cleanses ... Mar 16, 19
- Kitchen appliances
  - as gifts ... Dec 15, 16
  - shopping for ... Aug 15, 39
- Kitchen remodeling ... Aug 15, 27
  - one-stop shopping ... Aug 15, 30

L–P

- Laundry detergents ... Sep 15, 18; May 16, 56
- Laundry machines ... May 16, 56
- Lawn care ... May 16, 18
- Lawn mowers ... May 16, 22
- Leaf blowers ... Nov 15, 13
- Lightbulbs ... Oct 15, 45
  - smart ... Jun 16, 9
- Loans
  - mortgages
    - reverse ... May 16, 14
- Longevity, savings and ... Aug 15, 10
- Lottery ... Dec 15, 44
- Luggage
  - carry-on ... Feb 16, 12
- Maple syrup ... Mar 16, 20
- Mattresses ... Feb 16, 34
- Medical alert systems ... May 16, 24
- Medical bills ... Mar 16, 8
- Medical marijuana ... Jun 16, 28
- Mortgages
  - reverse ... May 16, 14
- Outdoor equipment
  - as gifts ... Dec 15, 54
- Packaging ... Nov 15, 24
- Pain relief ... Jun 16, 28
- Paints & stains
  - labeling claims ... Sep 15, 8
- Pasta ... Dec 15, 13
- Pet insurance ... May 16, 12
- Photography, smartphone ... Jul 15, 22; Jun 16, 10
- Pillows ... Feb 16, 34
- Portable devices
  - as gifts ... Dec 15, 40
- Pressure washers ... Mar 16, 22
- Printers ... Dec 15, 10

R–S

- Radiation ... Nov 15, 7
- Ranges ... Aug 15, 40
- Recycled wrapping paper ... Dec 15, 25
- Refrigerators ... Aug 15, 43
  - icemakers, servicing ... Jul 15, 9
- Regifting ... Dec 15, 43
- Reverse mortgages ... May 16, 14
- Roadside assistance ... Dec 15, 69
- Robocalls ... Sep 15, 14; Mar 16, 8
- Routers ... Jan 16, 12
- Scales
  - smart ... Mar 16, 16
- Scams
  - home security ... Dec 15, 13
  - phishing by text message ... Oct 15, 12
  - senior-targeted ... Nov 15, 28
  - taxes ... Feb 16, 11
- Shaving supplies
  - subscription services ... May 16, 11
- Shopping
  - online or not? ... Jul 15, 10
- Shrimp
  - antibiotics in ... Aug 15, 9
- Sinks & faucets
  - bathroom ... Sep 15, 38
  - kitchen ... Aug 15, 35
- Sleep aids ... Feb 16, 32
- Smartphones
  - Apple iPhone 6 ... Jul 15, 49
  - devices & services ... Feb 16, 46
  - navigation apps ... Oct 15, 34
  - photo lens add-ons ... Jun 16, 10
  - photo storage ... Dec 15, 10
  - Samsung Galaxy S line ... Jul 15, 49; Jun 16, 27
  - for seniors ... Sep 15, 13
- Snacks & snacking ... Sep 15, 44
- Snow blowers ... Jan 16, 34
- Snow shovels ... Jan 16, 38
- Soft drinks
  - reduced-calorie ... Jan 16, 10
- Solar power ... Oct 15, 40
- Space heaters ... Jan 16, 22
- Speakers
  - wireless ... Mar 16, 20
- Stores
  - Bed Bath & Beyond, return policy ... Aug 15, 9
  - return policies ... Dec 15, 58
- Streaming media
  - services & players ... Jun 16, 15
- Student discounts ... Oct 15, 10
- Sunscreens ... Jul 15, 38; Jan 16, 12

T

- Taxes
  - scams ... Feb 16, 11
  - tips ... Feb 16, 11
  - Tax-preparation software ... Mar 16, 21
- Technical support ... Jul 15, 46
- Telephones
  - smartphones
    - Apple iPhone 6 ... Jul 15, 49
    - navigation apps ... Oct 15, 34
    - Samsung Galaxy S line ... Jul 15, 49; Jun 16, 27
    - for seniors ... Sep 15, 13
- Television ... Aug 15, 48
  - mergers, Comcast-Time Warner ... Jul 15, 8
  - Pay-TV ... Dec 15, 6
- Television sets
  - buying tips ... Nov 15, 38
  - Ultra HD ... Mar 16, 15
- Timeshares ... Mar 16, 48
- Toilet paper ... Oct 15, 20
- Toilets ... Sep 15, 38; Jun 16, 13
- Tools
  - as gifts ... Dec 15, 54
- Trans fats, new FDA regulations on ... Oct 15, 9
- Tree tools ... Oct 15, 18

V–W

- Vaccines ... Oct 15, 12
- Vacuum cleaners ... Nov 15, 22
  - performance on super-plush carpet ... Mar 16, 9
  - robotic ... Jul 15, 48
- Veggie burgers ... Jun 16, 20
- Video streaming ... Aug 15, 48
  - choosing ... Sep 15, 13
- Virtual reality ... Mar 16, 12
- Waffle makers ... Mar 16, 20
- Washing machines ... Nov 15, 18; May 16, 56
- Watches, smart ... Aug 15, 18
- Water conservation ... Jul 15, 14
- Wedding industry ... Jun 16, 48
- Windshield defrosting ... Feb 16, 13

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PHOTOS: BRENDAN WIXTED

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